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THE COMPLETE BOOK

A POWDER VALLEY WESTERN

RIDERS OF THE OUTLAW TRAIL

PETER FIELD

A pair of horse thieves start more than a stampede when they tangle with Pat, Sam and Ezra.

"Every man in this strip of country is either an outlaw, or a law enforcement officer on his trail!"

"And they all know it! It's dang queer we ain't seen nobody at all," Ezra groused.

The words were barely out of his mouth when the echoing crang-g of a rifle rang out, the slug zipping across the tips of a nearby brush.

"They've circled us, an' they mean business," Sam roared. "Come on—we're hittin' for the rocks!" They had just reached cover when a band of ragged Mexicans came galloping into sight.

"Leave your guns strictly alone, boys," muttered Pat, "an' let me do the talkin'—this looks like a tight squeeze comin' up!"

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PETER FIELD

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RIDERS OF THE OUTLAW TRAIL

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Riders of the Outlaw Trail

1.

Bright, early morning sunlight flashed over the Colorado range and slanted down into Powder Valley. The air was rosy and clear. At the south end of the valley the rough log ranch house of the Bar ES slumbered on under cottonwoods, no smoke rising from its rude stone chimney. Only the dozen or so superb roan horses in the fenced pasture moved about, interrupting their morning frisk occasionally to stand motionless, gazing toward the silent ranch house as if finding the circumstance unusual.

Suddenly the slab door burst open with a bang, and a short, stocky, stubble-jawed man came out running. Minus his pants, and in his sock feet, he presented a ludicrous figure. But there was nothing humorous in his fury as he whirled a few yards from the door to face the lanky, cadaverous and redheaded giant who glared after him out of a single smoldering eye.

"Lay off, yuh knobby-kneed, overgrown lug," Sam Sloan barked, caressing a tender foot while he danced about precariously on the other. "If yuh want any breakfast, yuh ain't improvin' yore chances none by dumpin' me outa bed!"

"I want it t'day, not next Friday," Ezra snorted fiercely. "Jest because we sold off our hosses don't mean you're gonna lay snorin' till noon, like a blasted sybarite!"

"Toss my boots out here," Sam flung back crossly, "or yuh won't eat till a week from Friday. I ain't takin' another step in this dang stone patch, for you nor nobody—"

Ezra was ready to accommodate. Two seconds later Sam ducked his head to avoid one of the flung boots, while the second struck his rotund stomach with a thump. Muttering angrily, the little man retrieved the boots and pulled them on.

"Don't forgit, next week is yore turn t' cook," he reminded Ezra sourly, stumping into the cabin. "I kin make it jest as miserable for you."

"Try it, an' hominy grits'll be comin' outa yore ears," Ezra retorted viciously.

Silence ensued, broken only by Sloan's banging about the iron cookstove as he prepared breakfast. Partners of long years standing, these two were unfailingly bilious of a morning, and likely to prove cantankerous at any time. Both secretly enjoyed their endless wrangling, which had no bearing whatever on their fierce loyalty.

They were still grumpy with each other an hour later. Three days ago, having sold off the bulk of their fine roan herd for an excellent price, they had looked forward with zest to a period of luxurious idling. But already inactivity had palled. Wandering dejectedly about the ranch yard, both were bored to death, although either would have cheerfully cut his own throat before admitting it.

Communing sourly with himself, Ezra was turning over some worn bridle trappings in a saddle shed when the soft thud of horsehoofs and the sound of gruff voices reached him from outside. He started up alertly.

"I was wonderin' if Pat Stevens would show up this mornin'," he muttered.

But neither of the men sitting astride gaunt bay horses was their old friend Stevens of the Lazy Mare. Ezra's single, hooded eye slitted with curiosity. He had never seen this pair before, and immediately he asked himself what their errand here could be.

One was a grizzled oak knot of a man, stringy and hard, surprisingly bold and authoritative of manner for his modest size, and on the downhill side of fifty. His white-bristled chin was aggressive, his gray pupils flinty with challenge.

"McGill's my name," he was telling Sam Sloan arrogantly. "Rip, they call me. Reckon they ain't far wrong." Obviously he expected the name to be recognized.

"Sloan's mine." Sam nodded with ready good humor. "An' this is my pardner, Ezra."

Moving forward, Ezra nodded an absent greeting, his glance fastened on McGill's companion. Short of forty and noticeably round-headed, his scalp shaved under the tilted campaign hat, this man presented less the appearance of a human being than of a sleek, well-fed and somehow furtive animal, thoroughly satisfied with itself. Meeting Ezra's glance, his colorless eyes were opaque and absolutely expressionless. He said nothing.

"Meet Cal Dyer," McGill said gruffly.

"Howdy, Dyer." Sam nodded again.

Seeming almost to purr, Dyer still neglected to open his lips. There was a possibility that the man was a mute, but he did not leave the impression of any deficiency. Ezra examined his pale, almost nonexistent brows with distaste. Something about this enigmatic man ruffled his normally placid nerves uncomfortably.

"Been lookin' yore spread over a mite," Rip McGill opened up abruptly. "I'm in the market for a smallish place. What's yore price?"

Sam looked faintly surprised at the sudden introduction of such a topic. "We ain't sellin'," Ezra thrust in shortly.

McGill stared at him. "Nonsense! Any man'll sell—for a figure! But mind, I don't aim to be robbed."

Sam laughed. "Yuh won't be, here anyway. Ez told yuh we ain't sellin'. I'll bend a whiffletree over his noggin if he tries it."

Uninvited, McGill dismounted to poke about the ranch yard curiously. The partners watched him, not quite knowing what to make of the situation. "Corrals ain't none too strong," McGill grumbled, although they looked capable of withstanding the assault of yoked oxen. "One or two o' them sheds're about t' tumble down, too. An' the cabin needs chinkin' bad. . . . What do yuh say to twenty-five hundred, Sloan?"

Sam looked amazed. He and Ezra had more than once turned down offers running several thousand higher for their ranch and holdings, actually in very fair shape.

"You've got yore nerve, McGill," Sam burst out, in humorous exasperation. "We've told yuh we ain't dickerin'. Start from ten thousand, an' we'll still want to think it over."

McGill showed exaggerated disgust. "I've met bargainers before, Sloan, but you're jest plain stubborn. I aim t' have this place, an' I ain't payin' a cent over three thousand. Git yore blowin' an' snortin' done," he proceeded harshly, "an' we'll come down t' cases."

Sam's blue-stubbled face darkened. "Oh, hell," he snorted. "You're hard t' convince. But I'll tell yuh one last time—yuh ain't buyin' the Bar ES for no price!"

"Ain't I?" McGill snarled, suddenly ferocious.

In the electric pause which followed, Ezra's gravelly rumble conveyed its own threat. "Keep yore hand away from yore gun, Dyer," he advised. "Before I part yuh from that hoss, sudden an' complete!"

Cal Dyer carefully folded both hands over his saddle-horn, without any change of expression whatever.

"An' while you're about it," Sam pursued flatly, "yuh can both turn yore broncs and amble on. I ain't uncommon fussy, but I draw the line at yore brand o' brass. So long!"

A glance flashed between McGill and Dyer. If old Rip appeared considerably nettled, the catlike Dyer was by no means intimidated. But he seemed to know when the cards were running against him. It was he who deliberately reined his mount away, still without useless talk, and started out of the ranch yard. Fuming under his breath, McGill swung astride and followed in wrathful chagrin.

"I'll be back, first time my business brings me this way," he threatened over his shoulder, harshly.

"What business would that be?" Sam wondered sarcastically. "We ain't had no boom in ranch stealin' around here lately, McGill. I'd look somewheres else—"

Rip seemed about to fling back a fiery retort when an admonitory murmur from Dyer effectively silenced him. Sam and Ezra watched them jog away at a deliberate pace.

"Wonder who that third hombre is," the big redhead muttered under his breath.

Sloan looked his surprise. "Yuh got spots before yore eye," he said derisively. "*I* only seen two of 'em . . ."

Ezra's fierce glance quickly disabused him. "There *was* a third man, Sam, hangin' back a quarter-mile out on the range, all the while them birds was here," he insisted, with a marked absence of heat. "Had my eye on 'im all the while. He acted like a lookout." His tone said that he found the circumstance ominous.

Sam stared after the departing pair, by this time little more than moving dots in the distance. Even as he watched, a third tiny figure emerged from the brush to join them. They rode on together, and presently disappeared over a rise.

Sam thought it over for a moment, his blunt nostrils twitching. Of a less suspicious nature than his lanky partner, except under strong provocation, the whole incident struck him as slightly ludicrous. "Wal, they're gone now," he remarked gruffly. "Likely lookin' outfit, an' no mistake—whoever they are."

"If yuh mean likely t' live long, I ain't agreein'," retorted Ezra. "They're a bunch o' crooks, Sam. I'll stake plenty on it!"

Sloan's beady black eyes glinted with amusement. "So what? They didn't git into *yore* hard-earned profits, so what're yuh worryin' about?" he jibed.

Ezra went away in a huff, incensed that the warning of his ruffled nerves should be so lightly brushed aside. But he could not forget the sinister impression left on him by Cal Dyer, and long after the subject of the strange visitors languished between the partners, he remained restless and uneasy.

Morning passed without further event, and in the afternoon the long-legged giant saddled up. He was gone for

several hours, riding the range with apparent aimlessness. Later Sloan discovered him brooding about the horse pasture, his usually impassive visage cast in lines of gloom.

"What's eatin' yuh now?" Sam asked impatiently. "Still thinkin' about them hombres? I declare, Ez, you're gettin' positively unsocial."

Ezra grunted without bothering to offer a rejoinder, but he spent a markedly moody and preoccupied evening, ignoring Sam's placid game of solitaire to prowl outside at intervals, sniffing the air like a wary old badger. Nor could he have put a name to his apprehensions.

The partners retired in unaccustomed silence, and Sloan was awakened at early dawn to hear the tall redhead already stumbling about the chilly cabin.

"Wal! What now?" Sam asked irritably.

Stamping his boots on, Ezra gave no reply whatever. A moment later he moved outside, leaving the cabin door aswing on the frosty morning air. Sam's indignation over this seemingly deliberate act was overshadowed, however, by his quick observation of the fact that Ezra had paused to snatch up a Winchester carbine before taking his departure.

Sam rolled out of bed hastily and hopped to the door. "Did yuh hear somethin'?" he called after Ezra.

"No," the lanky one answered shortly. He kept going. Sam was building up the fire when he returned, ten minutes later. A glance at the big fellow's tight face told that something was afoot. He did not leave Sloan long in suspense.

"That Bessie mare's gone from the pasture," he blurted out. "Ain't a sign of 'er out there!"

"Gone!" ejaculated Sam blankly. "How kin that be? Yuh mean she was stole?"

"Wal, the fence is busted down. Looks like a wild stallion might've tolled her off. . . . Wouldn't wonder if that's the way it was *meant* t' look."

Sam rushed out wordlessly to examine the scanty evidence.

There could be no doubt, at least, that the roan mare had disappeared completely.

Ezra was methodically preparing breakfast when Sam returned hurriedly to the house. "We'll eat, an' then I'll saddle up," the big fellow growled. "Toss them biscuits an' some jerky in a bag for me, Sam. This may take me a while."

Sloan stared at him sharply, arrested. The few animals they had retained after the sale of their herd were all valuable, roan Bessie being a prime favorite of theirs into the bargain. Neither questioned that they would get her back, nor did Sam propose to be left out of the pursuit.

"What's the idea?" he snapped. "Yuh don't need me this time. Is that it?"

"I c'd use yuh, all right," Ezra allowed. "But you're needed here. That fence has gotta be patched, for one thing—"

"So I kin stay an' patch it, huh?"

Ezra glared at him steadily, and shrugged. "Okay! Git yore diapers on, little man. We'll fix the fence, an' git!"

They got away in short order, prepared for anything. The finest tracker in southern Colorado, his loss of one eye in a knife fight notwithstanding, Ezra had little trouble in picking up the sign of the truant horse. A double set of tracks led them west toward the wild Culebras, towering into the deep-blue sky. Ezra studied the trail with attention as the hours passed.

"Learn anything 'bout that wild stallion?" Sloan queried curiously.

"Sure—an' don't be surprised if it turns out t' be named Rip McGill," returned Ez unemotionally.

Sam stared. "Rip McGill? Why, there was three in his bunch, by yore own count! Accordin' to *these* tracks, Bess an' this other bronc're alone . . ."

"Tracks show a rider," retorted Ezra doggedly. "Hoss don't act like no wild mustang, neither. Dunno how McGill done it, but he's behind this." He sounded positive.

Sam saw the logic of the argument. The actions of a wild

range stud were distinctive and indisputable. Moreover, experience had long demonstrated that what Ezra said was very likely to be so. Still Sam pretended to scoff.

"Yuh got McGill on the brain!"

"Mebby so." Ezra was firm. "What I'm doin' now is tryin' t' git him off my back."

Whatever the truth was, certainly the runaway horses were traveling steadily. The tracks had been some hours old when Ezra and Sam started, and they did not appear to have drawn up appreciably by the time late afternoon overtook them, deep in the folds of the mountain range. The pine slopes rose about them, gloomy and deserted.

They rode on till full dark, under Ezra's guidance, and early dawn of the following morning saw them once more on their way.

"Gettin' closer now," Ezra growled approvingly when slanting sunlight under the trees revealed in clear detail the tracks they were following. They pushed on steadily, only Sam's engrossed countenance revealing the weight of his thoughts.

"We runnin' into McGill, yuh reckon—or that Dyer hombre?" he queried. "An' what about that third feller? There's only one of 'em leadin' Bess. . . . What if the other two are layin' some kind of an ambush?"

"Does it matter?" Ezra snorted, with scant respect. But toward midday they slackened their headlong pace, scanning the rocks and trees circumspectly. Both saw to their guns, and avoided any unnecessary noise.

Rounding a tongue of firs, Sam reined in suddenly to gaze up the canyon they were following. A hundred yards beyond, Bessie, their Bar ES mare, stood tethered to a sapling, her silky ears cocked in their direction. She whinnied an eager greeting. They saw she was alone, with no sign of her abductors anywhere in evidence.

"Wal!" Ezra's comment, as he stared about, was short. "Scared out, I reckon."

Sam rode in a wide circle, and had his careful look. Rejoining Ez, he shook his head shortly. He had seen nothing. "Shall we cache up here, an' wait for 'em to come back?" he asked.

Ezra took his time over his answer. "Un-uh." His negative was decided. "Somethin' uncommonly pat about this deal, Sam. We got Bess. We're pullin' out for home now—an' fast."

It seemed a wise course. They had already been away from the Bar ES for some thirty-six hours. At this tame conclusion of their chase, Sloan suddenly remembered that Ezra had not wanted him to come at all. Would they find things all right on their return? Sam did not know, but he was all for getting back there in the shortest possible time.

Though they traveled steadily, it was early afternoon of the third day when they drew near the ranch once more. A swift scowl visited Ezra's brow as he gazed down there from the last slope, much as if what he saw only confirmed his direst suspicions.

"Funny all our hosses're down under the creek bank at one time," he muttered, scanning the empty pasture.

Sam peered for a long moment from under close-knit brows, "They ain't, Ez!" he ripped out then. "Them broncs are gone, every last one of 'em! . . . It's *us* that was tolled off this time! The horses were stole while we was prowlin' the canyons—drove off with a three-day start!" He groaned aloud. "This here was child's play, an' no mistake. When'll we ever grow up?"

They rode down the slope in ominous silence, and a hasty examination revealed Sam's analysis to be correct. The Bar ES roans had indeed been driven off. The pasture was empty. Ezra's grunt, once they found their worst fears confirmed, was expressive.

"I *said* yuh shoulda stayed here—but no, yuh knowed better," was his sole comment on Sloan's disastrous refusal to remain on the ranch. "Mebby from now on, yuh'll listen t' old Grampa!"

2.

"Tottin' up your sins, you two?"

Ezra and Sam whirled sharply, sensitive to the cool amusement in this new voice, unexpectedly breaking in on their gloomy thoughts. The tall, imperturbable man sitting his saddle a few feet away was well known to them. It was their friend, Pat Stevens. After scrutinizing the latter briefly, Ezra shrugged his bony shoulders resignedly.

"Say our mistakes, an' I'll agree we might's well begin—since there's nothin' much else left t' count," he growled. "Where'd yuh spring from, Stevens?"

"Been hanging round the ranch house for half an hour, wonderin' where you were," retorted Pat. "You were too busy to notice. Lose a nickel?" he inquired solicitously.

Sam snorted forcefully. "A nickel, he says! . . . Take a gander at that pasture, Pat!"

Stevens gravely did as directed. He shook his head soberly. "Don't see a thing, Sam . . ."

"Dang right yuh don't—an' that's jest the trouble!" Sloan ejaculated. It did not take him long to explain the full extent of their loss and the manner of its occurrence, to all of which Pat Stevens listened in silence, his thick black brows arched in mild surprise.

"Well, now!" he murmured. "Fancy a bunch of smart crooks gittin' into a couple of harmless old coots like you two."

Sam threw his battered hat at him in furious disgust. "Cut the clownin', Stevens! This is dang serious," he burst out angrily. "We not only lost what hosses we had left; but half a dozen of 'em was breedin' studs—the best stallions we ever had! We ain't takin' this layin' down, whether yuh think it's a good joke or not!"

Stevens speared Sam's hat out of the air and methodically poked it into shape while he turned the matter over. An independent stockman in his own right, owner of the prosperous Lazy Mare ranch farther north in Powder Valley, Pat was markedly younger than either of the crusty partners, in the prime of life. So close was the bond between them, however, that few of their adventures failed to include all three. By no means as amused as he pretended, the younger man's agile mind was already busy with the problem.

"Describe that pair again—McGill, and this Dyer," he directed, dismounting and skimming Sloan's hat back to its owner absent-mindedly.

Sam complied, aided now and again by Ezra. At the end, Pat inquired into the details of the pair's offer for the Bar ES, and shook his head dourly.

"Just a blind," he said. "They were lookin' the layout over —and mighty cool about it, too."

"Sure! I warned Sam they was slippery hombres," Ezra snorted. "He shouted me down—"

The tone of accusation he used bade fair to precipitate a fresh altercation between the two, but Stevens headed it off sternly.

"Skip it, Ez," he said. "You say you never did get a look at that third hombre with Dyer and McGill?"

"Naw. Too far away—an' we didn't know then how interested we was gonna be," Sam replied.

"No matter. We'll have our look soon enough, doubtless." Pat turned abruptly to Ezra. "If you've got any more grub handy in the house, gather it up, Ez," he instructed. "We'll get started, an' talk as we go."

"Goin' along, huh?" Ezra hesitated suspiciously. "Kinda quick on the trigger, ain't yuh, Stevens?"

Pat's grin flashed through his sobriety. "Shall I tell my dark secret? . . . I was startin' on a trip when I landed here, Ez. Thought I'd ask you boys to go along. No harm done if

I lengthen my own trip a bit—since there's more than a chance they may turn out to be one and the same errand."

"What's this, now?" Sloan pricked up his ears. "Don't tell me them smooth crooks paid the Lazy Mare a visit—"

"No, nothin' of that kind." But Stevens would explain no further, pretending severity. "From your story, the delay has already been overlong. Let's get started."

The partners took the hint, only too glad of the help of this capable man, while they could not resist affecting a broad toleration of his authoritative manner. They were soon ready to leave, their preparations amounting to little more than the procuring of extra food supplies, as Pat had suggested, since this ride promised to be of considerable duration. Stevens led the way to the Bar ES pasture, and they presently picked up the tracks of the rustled roans.

Little effort had been made by the thieves to cover the sign, and for an hour they followed it south on a course roughly paralleling the soaring Culebra Range.

"Pushin' for New Mexico to get out of th' Territory fast," commented Sam. "They must have a couple days start already."

"We'll cut that down," Pat predicted. "Without a dozen or so salty broncs to herd, we'll cover the ground faster than they can hope to do."

By midafternoon they began to experience trouble in following the trail of the roans. The horse thieves had got around at last to routine efforts at breaking their sign. It cost Ezra an hour to trace the animals into a rocky canyon gashing the mountain flanks, and back over a rough cutback to resume the old southward course. Stevens, for one, was rather encouraged than otherwise by this maneuver of the rustlers.

"They're beginning to sweat a little," he said. "What they don't see is that the time is only drawin' closer when they'll have to haul up to breathe the horses and let 'em graze a spell."

Ezra nodded agreement. When next the tracks faded out on the stony trail, the lanky tracker pushed straight ahead and increased his pace. "Ain't hard t' figger this thick-witted McGill's tricks," he growled. "Next time we pick his sign up, it'll be him that's lost an hour."

Pat Stevens was studying the empty range thoughtfully as he rode, not saying a great deal. Finally he spoke.

"All the talk is about Rip McGill," he remarked sententiously. "He must have made quite an impression on yuh both. I've heard mighty little about this Cal Dyer party. He was there. Tell me more about him."

Ez glanced at Pat in surprise. "You're plumb right," he assented with sudden conviction. "Forgettin' that hombre is bound t' be bad business." He described Dyer in some detail, not omitting the man's round, catlike head and pale brows, or the strange feline impression he created.

"Just what kind of talk did he use?" pursued Pat, frankly interested in the picture evoked by Ezra's description.

To their surprise, neither of the partners was able to quote so much as a single sentence spoken by the taciturn outlaw in their hearing. "He acted like Rip's right bower while he was here—but he didn't *look* much like it; and I didn't notice that he took any orders, neither," Sloan explained, in some puzzlement.

Pat put still further queries, and pondered the answers. "H'm. Sounds like Mr. Dyer sums up to more of a character than events would indicate," he observed critically, at the end. "Yuh sure he ain't behind most of McGill's tricky schemes?"

"Ain't sure atall," admitted Ezra. "From here, it looks like a good hunch, Pat. So far, Dyer's been too smooth t' open his trap. Mebby he's too smooth t' catch—"

"We'll just bear that in mind." Pat nodded, not at all troubled by the prospect.

Darkness overtook them deep in the hills. They had picked up the trail of the horses once more, and followed at a swift

pace till the dusk thickened. Whereupon they pulled up, the land here proving too broken to allow their proceeding blind with any degree of certainty. Fortunately, at this season the nights were not long. First daylight found them in the saddle once more. They shoved on fast.

"This may be our chance," Sam declared. "McGill ain't spelled the roans yet, that we could see. He's got t' pull up somewheres—an' when he does, we'll cut his lead 'way down."

Stevens shrugged. "I've thought that over, too, Sam. Yuh said yourself that the horses those fellows ran off were the cream of your herd. Every horse in that bunch is fast and tough. And Dyer, or McGill—whoever's boss in that crowd—won't be easy on 'em. We've got our work cut out for us."

Again this morning the trail they were following presented complications which required all of Ezra's considerable skill and shrewdness to unravel. They soon saw that they were not making any outstanding gains in the way of drawing up on their quarry. Sheets of naked rock and areas of flinty soil made the trail anything but easy to follow. Ezra traced it out of this rugged country, down off the wooded slopes toward rangeland again. His companions noted the one-eyed redhead glancing ahead in a dubious manner.

"Headin' toward ranch country," he announced at length. "That makes it not so good—"

They soon discovered his meaning, as the stray tracks of cattle and range horses began to mingle with the sign laid down by the horses they were pursuing. Ezra's superior ability carried them over these difficulties until they descended into a broad mountain basin. The evidences of human activities increased as they advanced.

"Small ranches scattered all through here, looks like," Sam Sloan observed.

"Yeh. An' the New Mexico line jest beyond them mountains yonder," Ezra muttered. "Once they lose us in them tumbled hills, we're sunk!"

"They haven't lost us yet, Ez," returned Pat serenely.

However, it began to look presently as if this was precisely what was about to occur. Sam studied a thin haze of dust a mile away over the rises, bushy brows knitted.

"Herd travelin' over there some'eres," he murmured uneasily. "Looks like jest the way we're goin', too."

They drilled on, clinging to the trail of the roans. Breaking over the brow of a slope, they hauled in to gaze down the long slant toward the little herd of upwards of a score of steers, plodding along the faint trail down there, bawling lugubriously from time to time and kicking up a yellow pall of dust as they went. A single rider appeared to be driving them, partially obscured by the dust cloud.

"Hang it, he's coverin' up any tracks there mighta been down there," ejaculated Sam wrathfully.

"You mean he's *tryin'* to—if that's what he's about," corrected Pat shortly. "An hour from now, or whenever that hombre's got where he's goin', we might've been too late. As it is, it's anybody's guess whether this was deliberate or not. I move," he continued after a moment, "that we go down there and talk to that gent!"

They pressed forward in haste, drawing up rapidly on the lumbering cattle. The horseman in charge of the steers, they presently saw, was a young fellow dressed in the conventional garb of a puncher. Something made him glance back while the trio were still a hundred yards or more distant. He waved briefly, and promptly returned with some ostentation to the task of herding his charges along. Pat shoved on till he was within easy shouting distance.

"Hey, you!" he called curtly and, having secured the puncher's surprised attention, beckoned him forward.

The puncher visibly hesitated. Then turning his mount, he jogged out to meet the three, an expression of lively curiosity overspreading his features. Pat and the partners found themselves scrutinizing a young fellow of twenty-odd, well

set up with the lean, whip-hard frame common to his kind, and with piercing blue eyes under the backward-canted Stetson.

"What'll it be, boys?" he sang out peremptorily. "I'm sorta busy just now . . ."

"What's your outfit, friend?" Pat queried dryly, ignoring the other's haste. "Stevens's my name."

"My outfit?" The puncher looked blank. "Oh! Block VC, pardner—lies off across the hills yonder." His sweeping gesture, including a sizable scope of range, was rather vague, to say the least. "They ain't hirin' just now, though," he went on debonairly, and paused to scan them more carefully. "Ridin' through, I reckon?"

Pat gestured toward the cattle. "Where yuh takin' the beef, may I ask?"

His strict manner did not relax, and it caused the puncher to stiffen imperceptibly. "Driftin' 'em down to summer range," he answered shortly. "Does it matter?" There was an air of honest perplexity in his demeanor which made him seem neither more nor less than what he professed to be, a ranch hand in the routine performance of his duties; yet Stevens did not allow his lurking suspicions to become wholly allayed.

"Comin' at just this time, it's quite possible it might matter a lot," he drawled, and switched to another tack without pausing. "Happen to see some men drivin' a bunch of roan horses through here, last night or this morning?"

"No."

The answer came as patly and promptly as if it had been expected. Sam Sloan's eyes widened at the puncher's stubborn assurance.

"Sure o' that, are yuh, brother?" he queried softly.

"Why shouldn't I be?" was the crusty retort. "Would it cost me anything to say yes, if I did see anything? . . . What goes on here, anyway?" he said with frank indignation.

"We think yuh could tell us, if it comes to that," Pat inserted coolly. "What's yore name, my friend?" he broke off to ask suddenly. "Not some nice, shiny, brand-new one you've just thought up—just the old one yuh use every day."

"It's—" The pause was of the briefest. "Jack Ambler, and be damned to yuh!" The blue eyes snapped sparks.

"Ambler, eh?" Stevens weighed that. "How come the Anchor branded on yore bronc? Block VC runnin' short of saddle stock?"

"An' how come the steers you're drivin' jest *happen* t' be trampin' out the tracks we're follerin'?" Sam thrust in. "Pure accident, I expect! . . . Yuh wouldn't be follerin' out orders, by any chance?"

Ambler stared at them hotly. "Damned if yuh ain't a good-natured bunch," he exclaimed. "Maybe yuh want to ride back to the ranch an' talk this over with the boss . . ."

"And have yuh cut and run, after we've wasted a good hour gettin' there?" Pat shook his head dourly. "No thanks, Ambler. Nothin' in that for us—but at the same time, we won't forget meetin' yuh, or what yuh were doin'!"

With a growl, Ambler hauled his horse around, and they watched him race after the scattering steers. Stevens shrugged.

"Is *he* the third member of McGill's gang?"

Pat voiced the question they were all asking themselves. "We can't be sure enough yet to take action. But time'll tell. Let's pick up the sign of those roans, an' be on our way."

After circling the steers on the trail, they returned to it some distance beyond, picked up the horse tracks, and pressed on. Nothing further arose to delay them as the hours passed. But late in the morning signs appeared indicating their approach to a larger ranch than any they had hitherto seen. Still the clear prints of the stolen horses drove on. They discovered a place at last where the animals had been hauled up in the midst of a pine grove, where they had remained for some time. Ezra said at least three men had been with them here—possibly four. Then the tracks led on.

"Some gall, drivin' stolen stock straight acrost open range like this," Sam exclaimed. "Yuh don't reckon we kin look for a bushwhack, or a trap o' some kind, Pat?"

The broad-shouldered man didn't know, and cheerfully admitted as much. After their suspicious meeting with young Ambler, however, they allowed nothing to escape them. Despite their vigilance, it came as a totally unexpected surprise when they rode out of a fold in the rolling slopes to find themselves in the open, with distant riders in sight at almost every point of the compass.

"Now what?" Ezra bristled, hauling up. "There's half a dozen o' them fellers. They've spotted us, too, an' they're all closin' in—"

What he said was true. A few seconds later a faint crack sounded, and a rifle slug whined over their heads.

"Fair warnin'—to haul up or hunt our hole," Pat gritted thinly. "Those boys ain't at all friendly, that's plain enough." Something about this setup appeared to be puzzling him. He wasted precious seconds, gazing about in perplexity.

"C'mon," Ezra rasped. "Them birds ain't all horse thieves! There's somethin' else stirrin'! We better git outa here!"

Still Pat hesitated. "There's the hitch, boys," he rejoined soberly. "This happens to be Max Christian's Cross Ladder spread—the place I was headin' for when I showed up at the Bar ES yesterday. I happened to know there's trouble brewing down here, but I don't savvy what they've got against us—"

Further gunfire attested to the fact that, whatever their purpose, the men on this range were taking it with the utmost seriousness. Slugs thudded into the ground near at hand, beginning to whistle closer every second.

"Them ornery hombres mean t' down us first, an' ask questions afterward," cried Sam as a ball nicked his battered hat.

Pat jabbed a thumb toward an isolated, rocky butte a

thousand yards behind them. "Make for cover, quick!" he whipped out, whirling his horse and kneeing it into a run. "An' don't fire back, except to scare 'em off! We'll have to stall 'em somehow till we can find out what this is all about."

3.

Their mounts scrambled up the rocky slope of the butte to the tune of whining ricochets. Fortunately they found a crevice gashing the crumbling yellow sandstone into which they were able to maneuver the horses. They dismounted and, crouching in the cover of fantastic weathered crags, waited.

Their attackers were not long in closing in. They heard harsh cries and directions floating up from below, and the slugs glanced closer. Pat was at some pains to scrutinize the determined range men down there, even at considerable risk to himself. Grimly they forced their way up the rugged slope.

"They sure ain't leavin' nothin' t' chance," Ezra groused angrily.

Pat held up a hand for quiet. He could hear their assailants calling guardedly to one another in the rocks. The tone of their talk, sharp and quick, indicated they were resolved that this fight should not end in a draw.

"Wal, Stevens—give it a name," rasped Sam irritably. "Either we start shootin' mighty quick, or practice our lessons on a harp. Them birds mean business!"

Ignoring him, Pat continued to peer downward. A searching rifle ball almost knocked off his hat. Suddenly curling a hand around his mouth, he called out strongly.

"Hey, Max! Max Christian!" His yell pealed down over the rocky slope. "Are yuh there?"

For a brief space there was silence, even the gunfire slacking off. Then an answering cry came up.

"Who is that?" Christian, the Cross Ladder rancher, sounded alert and severe. "I reco'nize that voice—only it don't make sense. If it's you, Stevens, show yoreself!"

"Not till I know where I stand, Christian," Pat retorted humorously. "It's me, all right. Call off your dogs an' I'll prove it quick enough—"

There came a sound of scrambling from below, and the grizzled, leathery cattleman appeared boldly in the open. "Lay off, boys," he warned his men. "Reckon we've made some kind of a mistake here. . . . Now, Stevens!" He turned to face up the rocky slope. "Yuh can crawl out, you an' yore friends, an' we'll iron the kinks outa this business."

Pat nodded to the partners. A moment later the three showed themselves on the rocks.

"How come the warm welcome, Christian?" Pat demanded, with easy bluntness. "I thought yuh were expectin' me—"

Christian stared up at him in something like confusion. "Yuh'll have to overlook it, Stevens," he returned gruffly. "Things're rough down here. Gittin' so we dunno what to expect no more. . . . It was yore Bar ES broncs threw us off in the first place," he concluded simply.

"Our broncs?" Pat failed to grasp the connection. "Never knew the brand had that kind of a rep, here or anywheres."

"Wal, it come about right sudden," the rancher replied, climbing upward, and waving his watchful punchers in. "A couple days ago, four smooth hombres showed up here, posin' as Powder Valley men. They was all ridin' Bar ES stuff, an' it seemed to make sense. I hired 'em to move a Cross Ladder herd south to the railroad."

"Go on." Pat nodded, keenly interested.

"Wal, Stevens, in less than twelve hours my entire trail herd disappeared completely—an' them four strangers with

'em! They never reached the loadin' pens, anyway, an' riders reported no such herd on the trail!"

Sam Sloan was taking all this in with a sharp ear. "They plumb disappeared, yuh say? That's funny. Yuh mean they was rustled, I expect?"

The rancher shrugged. "What else could yuh call it? Yuh can understand," he added gruffly, "that when one of the boys spotted yore brands through the glasses this mornin', we thought it was them same fellers, come callin' again."

"That's all right, Christian." Pat grinned. "Reckon you've had sufficient provocation to start throwin' lead, at that. It was on this account, I presume, you telegraphed me at Powder Valley to come runnin'?"

"Sure." The cattleman nodded. "But I never expected yuh to get here so soon—"

"Didn't, huh?" Ezra barked out, still somewhat incensed over the promiscuous shooting. "How do yuh reckon Stevens earned his name for handlin' these cases, Christian? By sittin' still an' wishin' the rustlers in?"

Christian's good sense manifested itself now in a crusty chuckle. "Mebby I had that comin'," he growled, without offense. "Anyway, I was hopin' Stevens could tell me somethin' 'bout them oily Bar ES riders."

"I kin accommodate yuh there. They wasn't Bar ES men atall, an' don't yuh forgit it!" Briefly Ezra sketched events on the Bar ES horse ranch, and the manner in which the strangers had acquired their mounts. "First I knowed there was four of 'em, though. It only nails Rip McGill down as the head of an organized gang."

"Yuh say yore stock disappeared without a trace, Christian?" Pat returned to the subject curiously. "Seems queer an entire herd could fade out in just that way. How many head were yuh shippin'?"

" 'Bout three hundred," was the reply. "Mebby a dozen or so over. I was sendin' Henry MacIntosh to the pens for

a close count. He come ridin' back to the ranch to ask where they was—"

"I see." Pat pushed his Stetson back and scratched his head thoughtfully, his strong features sober. "From Sam and Ezra's experience with 'em, this McGill crowd's a mighty snaky outfit," he mused. "I won't make any guesses about what happened till I've looked the ground over."

"That's usin' yore savvy," the rancher said approvingly. He hesitated then. "O' course, yuh understand this shootin' we treated yuh to was all an accident—" His stumbling apology clearly included the partners.

Sam Sloan waved a pudgy hand, grinning. "Wouldn't think overmuch o' yore boys if they'd passed up the chance." He disposed of the matter lightly. "We're used to it."

Uncertain how to take this brand of raillery, the Cross Ladder punchers shifted their feet uncomfortably.

Sam did not let up on them. "Can't say as much for the quality of their shootin'," he remarked engagingly to Ezra.

"I've seen better m'self." The big fellow nodded solemnly. "Mebby it's jest as well for us . . ."

Max Christian's chesty guffaw interrupted any further sallies. "You boys earned yore leetle joke the hard way." He grinned. "Can't hate yuh for rubbin' it in a bit. If it's okay, we'll forget 'bout it now an' get down to business."

Pat agreed. "Bring out our horses, Sam," he directed, "an' we'll be on our way. We've lost enough time as it is."

They were soon pursuing a course across the Cross Ladder range. Christian advised time out for a hasty meal at the headquarters ranch, after which the Cross Ladder hands were dispatched about their regular work.

"Now, Christian," Pat said, "maybe yuh'd better show us where your shippin' herd was gathered, an' we'll follow the sign a ways. This disappearance of three hundred steers can hardly be as big a mystery as it sounds."

The rancher led the three friends to a small basin on the outskirts of his range, where the roundup had been held.

They were not long in picking out the direction followed by the herd on its way toward the railroad.

There was no difficulty whatever in tracing the heavily beaten trail at this point. It took a winding course through the thick brush, nor did it so much as leave Cross Ladder range land for a number of miles.

"Nothin' mysterious about this," commented Sloan, with a faint tinge of scorn.

"Wait," the rancher counseled.

He seemed so sure of himself that Sam was given pause. And Pat began to notice shortly that the trail appeared somewhat less heavily beaten down than formerly. This might have resulted from the flinty hardness of the soil, but he didn't think so. Already an experienced eye would have judged that less than one hundred and fifty steers had been driven past this point, rather than twice that number, as Christian had averred.

"Quite a few steers rangin' in through this brush, t' be drivin' a herd past," Ezra remarked a few minutes later.

"I can tell yuh somethin' else." Pat spoke up suddenly, turning to Christian. "Jog over an' take a gander at the steers hidin' in that brush patch yonder—"

With a strange look, as if not knowing what to expect, the cattleman did as directed. He came back before many minutes had passed, looking more puzzled than ever.

"My steers, all right," he announced. "Funnier yet, I'd swear them particular beeves belonged to the bunch I was aimin' t' ship—"

"No doubt about it whatever," Pat informed him readily. "They didn't slip away from the drive, either. . . . Comb this particular piece of country, an' you'll find considerably more of the same."

Christian's perplexity only continued to increase. "I don't get it, Stevens," he confessed. "Yuh can't mean them rustlers was deliberately cuttin' out steers as they went along, an'

driftin' 'em back on my own range? Because that's what yuh seem t' be sayin'!"

"You've got it." Pat smiled. "It's exactly what I'm claimin'. It's not so hard to figure out. There's just no other way to make a sizable trail herd disappear into thin air, as this one did. It had to be that way, crazy as it seems. Ride on, and there won't be any doubt left in yore mind that I'm dead right."

Once given the incredible clue, they were no great time in confirming Pat's diagnosis of what had actually taken place. Sam even discovered a spot where the sign in the dirt showed how several steers had been cut out of the herd and drifted back toward their home range. They had been pursued some distance, to make sure they scattered and drifted on. The final proof came as they closed in on the lurking animals and Christian caught a glimpse of his own brand.

"But it's all crazy, I tell yuh!" the rancher exclaimed incredulously. "Why, Stevens, this is jest like rustlin' in reverse! Why'd them crooks go t' all this trouble? Can yuh tell me that?" His lumpy brows were knotted with the intensity of his thought. "Yuh reckon they figure to come back an' drift this stuff away, a few head at a time, t' cut down their chances of bein' spotted?"

"It *could* be like that," Pat returned slowly. "Do yuh want us to keep a watch?"

Christian's tremendous scowl failed to relax. "Dang it, Stevens, I still think it's too late! I tell yuh, a quick count would still show my stock shy to the number of steers there was in that shippin' herd!"

Pat's nod was one of equal conviction. "I believe yuh," he said. "The more so because it's my opinion that McGill—or whoever it was—worked the same smooth switch on yuh that was so successful with Ezra and Sam."

"What yuh mean?"

Pat considered before replying. "I'll answer that with

another question. Where does yore main grazin' range lie, Christian?"

The cowman swept a beamlike arm toward the south and west. "Off yonder."

He waited for further questioning, but Pat chose to leave him in suspense. "We'll ride over there now," he said quietly. "I want a better look around, particularly at the creek where yore stock waters."

After threading their way through a mile of mesquite brush, they finally reached open range. Gradually the sparse grass tufts increased in frequency, indicating richer graze. On a grassy ridge crest, Christian gestured below.

"Poison Crick," he said simply. "Not an apt name, by a long shot—but it'll do, long as it keeps range-hungry men off my back."

Pat scanned the rolling, grassy meadows and the winding creek clumped with green willows. To the eye of a real stockman, it was indeed a pretty prospect. Here the bulk of Max Christian's herd was spread out over several miles of lush range.

"We'll ride down the creek a ways," Pat said.

They gazed about with interest as they rode. Cross Ladder steers were everywhere, cropping contentedly. Only a few spooky animals high-tailed for the cover of protecting draws as the men advanced.

"Looks like yuh had a pretty fair calf-drop this spring," Pat observed.

Christian's nod was moody. "This is fine range, Stevens. A man could git ahead fast if only the thieves'd leave him alone."

Pat laughed. "Can't blame yuh for bein' groggy, after learnin' your trail herd never left your range at all, and is still there, scattered broadcast. But that oughtn't to make a man sorry or sad—"

"Reckon I'm worried most about what may still turn up,"

was the grumpy reply. Christian was too old a hand to believe in range miracles, and he expected none now.

They rode on down the creek, angling across the best graze. Ezra pulled away from the others without comment, and they saw him turn here and there, having his thorough look.

"What's he after?" the Cross Ladder owner inquired gruffly.

"Wait—an' we'll let him tell it," responded Pat. "Yuh may not know it, Christian, but there goes the best tracker you'll ever have workin' for yuh."

The grizzled rancher watched dubiously. But his manner was anxious when Ezra abruptly turned back to join them.

"Been a herd throwed t'gether here in the last two, three days," the one-eyed giant announced. His sharp glance flicked to Christian. "Mean anythin'?"

Max shook a stout denial. "You're wrong there," he declared positively. "No gather was made here since early spring. We culled that shippin' herd from the north range." His tone was triumphant and conclusive.

Ezra looked expressively at Pat. "There yuh are," he growled defiantly. "Kin I help it if this old diehard won't believe his own eyes?"

"Easy, Ez. We'll undertake to make it plainer," Pat returned equably. He turned his horse. "Let's see if we can't pick up the plain trace of this recent movement."

Studying the throw of the country, he made for a low pass through the hills, in a direction which Christian said led away from the Cross Ladder range. Before they reached the pass, they ran across the unmistakable trail of a big drive. It appeared to be making directly toward the gap in the hills. Just as clearly, it had been made within the past few days.

Christian gasped at sight of the beaten tracks. "What's been goin' on here?" he whipped out harshly. "None o' my boys reported seein' this—"

"Simply because none of 'em did see it," Pat pointed out reasonably. "Aren't yuh beginnin' to catch on? Nobody's so much as bothered to hunt around over here. McGill an' his cronies were shrewd enough to set yuh watchin' an' huntin' in another direction altogether. Yuh saw how they got rid of the herd they were hired to drive. Then they slid over here, made their grab, and highlined out of the country, knowin' they could count on two or three days' head start, an' maybe longer!"

Christian's quivering jaw dropped as the shrewdness of the ruse dawned on him fully.

"Good gravy!" he boomed heavily. "What a caper! I didn't make no mistake, callin' yuh down here to unravel this snarl, Stevens. I wouldn't've had it figured out in a month o' Sundays!"

Pat's smile was tolerant. "A little familiarity with the way crooked minds work always helps," he remarked, his glance resting innocently on Sam Sloan and Ezra.

The latter caught that look and bristled instantly. "Suppose yuh explain that crack, Stevens," he challenged huffily. "I don't doubt yuh've seen 'nough crookedness in yore time, but I don't like yore tone of voice!"

Pat's surprise was overacted if anything. "Did I tromp on your sensitive feelings?" he inquired solicitously. "Wonder how in the world yuh could've thought I was ever talkin' about you—"

Sam's unhappy guffaw was thoroughly disillusioned. "Skip the aspersions, Stevens," he growled cynically. "Yuh may, or may not've meant anything special. But one thing is sure. Yuh been in the basket with us other rotten apples too long for there to be any great difference between us at this late date!"

"Yuh may be right," Pat chuckled, totally unimpressed. "I won't deny I lean on yore expert judgment from time to time —like in the present case."

4.

Christian was shooting suspicious looks from one to another of the trio as he listened. "You're a queer combination," he grunted wonderingly. "I ain't denyin' yuh get results though, an' that's what counts."

Pat nodded easily, his eyes amused. "We get along—when they listen to me," he said airily. "So now yuh know what happened to your cattle, Christian. Satisfied?"

"Not by a dang sight!" the rancher erupted. "Nor I won't be till I've laid them sleight-of-hand artists by the heels. . . . Won't take long to git back to the ranch and round up the boys. Then we'll be on our way."

"Hold it." Pat shook his head firmly. "Yuh won't need yore men, so forget it. In fact, there ain't anythin' for yuh to do. We're takin' this trail from here, Christian, in case yuh didn't know. I'll undertake to guarantee results of one kind or another."

"Not alone, yuh won't," Max retorted as resolutely. "What yuh say don't surprise me none, Stevens. It's like yuh to take this stand. But if anybody starts after them hombres, I'm goin', too, an' you can't stop me!"

"What're we arguin' about?" Ezra entered the talk abruptly. "It's four against four—an' Rip McGill ain't waitin' for us t' catch up. You're only playin' his game with all this windy palaver."

"Wal, I'm still goin' along," Max averred obdurately.

"Fine. Come just as yuh are, Christian." Pat nodded. "There'll never be a better time—an' we can always spare an extra bite in a pinch."

Old as he was, the determined rancher waited for no

further urging. He rode out in front as they pushed through the pass in the hills, a militant figure, stalwart and unafraid.

"I've fought off rustlers, an' Injuns, an' all sorts of assorted riffraff in my time, Stevens," he rasped. "But no doubt yuh know more 'bout this game than me. Where'll them shady gents be headin' for, would yuh say?"

Pat gauged the lay of the country, and asked a few questions before replying. Even then he took his time in making up his mind. "A lot depends on the kind of a crowd we're stacked up against," he said finally. "From what I've seen of 'em, they fancy themselves real terrors, but—"

"What yuh mean—but?" Sam Sloan interjected. "Rip McGill's proved hisself the head of a professional wild bunch! He's gone the whole hog, an' no dallyin' around about it. When we present his bill, he'll pay on the barrel head!"

The manner in which Pat weighed this fiery estimate of the situation indicated that he still was not inclined toward a hasty judgment.

"Don't get me wrong, Sam," he returned at length. "I don't aim to underrate Rip. But there's a brand-new breed of outlaw comin' up these days. You've seen yourself that they're shrewder, an' make their big plays from under cover. McGill puts up too much of a front for my book. He's more like a man gettin' a boot out of playin' tough—with the real article behind him, lettin' him do it. Overdo it, would be better!"

"You're thinkin' about that Cal Dyer again, now," Ezra charged. "Yuh can't get him off yore mind no more'n I kin."

Pat's nod was slow. "I'm rememberin' him, of course," he admitted. "The more I think about it, the surer I am that he's the real brains of that gang. Dyer's usin' Rip McGill for his own sly purposes—directin' activities from as far behind the scenes as he can stay, and still be sure of results."

Willing enough to be persuaded, Sam still chose to pretend doubt. "Gimme one good sound reason why yuh believe as yuh do," he challenged.

"Sure, I'll do that." Stevens took him seriously. "Think back over the way they got away with yore broncs, Sam. An' then remember the switch they pulled on Christian's cattle. In both cases they practically guaranteed themselves a clean getaway, with time enough to make it doubly certain. In yore opinion, turnin' over McGill's character as you found it to be, did he have the wits to figure those tricks out of his own accord?"

Sloan pondered briefly. But his conclusion was already foregone. Pat had made his point very clearly.

"From what *I* seen of this party you're callin' McGill, he didn't have savvy 'nough to git up in the mornin', unless he was awful hungry," Max Christian inserted gruffly.

Sam nodded ungrudging confirmation of these findings. "Dyer's elected in a landslide," he conceded. "I thought from the first there was somethin' mighty underhand about that hairpin. . . . Be a good idea," he added shrewdly, "not t' let him know right off how much we value him, when we do meet up."

"You've got something there," Pat agreed. "Dyer will stand close watchin', an' no mistake. I don't trust his kind, as long as he's able to breathe."

Their talk canvassed other aspects of the case as they pressed forward on the trail of the rustled Cross Ladder herd, but they lost no time. It proved soon enough that this ride would be more than a matter of hours.

Once clear of Christian's range, with a protecting line of hills between, the rustlers had driven south with no deviation other than that required to strike occasional water. The steers had been shoved on without letup. A dozen miles from their home range they had been bedded down for two or three hours, to conserve their stamina, and then driven on.

Evening overtook the pursuers miles from anywhere, in the midst of a desolate range. Christian gazed about silently in the fading light when Pat said they would haul up.

"We're either over the line already, or within a few miles

of New Mexico," the rancher announced. He staked out his pony to browse, and stood rubbing his hands together before the tiny blaze which Ezra speedily had going. "Yuh reckon there's any real chance of overhaulin' them thieves, Stevens?"

Pat looked at him in astonishment. "If I didn't, Christian, I wouldn't be here," he tossed back sharply. "It was yore idea to come with us—"

"Sure, I know," the cattleman admitted hastily. "Reckon I've watched too many steers disappear, in the past, without leavin' a trace." He sounded apologetic.

"That's better." Pat nodded. "Yuh can take my word for it that these will come back, if it has to be all the way from hell."

"Wal—it's more'n I could expect. I'm thankin' yuh in advance," Max pronounced gruffly.

"Not at all. Don't forget that a handful of Bar ES horses are involved here as well," Pat pointed out. "We'd play the hand out if no steers entered into the matter. Yuh might as well know the facts."

"Then I'm obliged to the horses."

Sam laughed his approval. "Yuh'll do to take along, Christian. If we let yuh down, it'll be in our sleep—an' I mean a long, unbroken, chilly one. Yuh can count on that."

A few minutes after their meager meal was finished, they rolled in their blankets. Nor did the distant yipping of coyotes from the hills keep any of them awake for longer than a few minutes.

Midmorning of the following day saw their course taking them down across the northeast corner of New Mexico. It was much lower country here; vegetation thinned out, and the heat grew oppressive. They saw various signs that the rustlers had been hard put to it to keep the cattle in rapid motion.

"Hittin' for the Panhandle," growled Christian, much incensed at the thought of all the beef being run off his stock.

"Must be figgerin' t' overbrand in some blind canyon, an' sell to one o' them big Texas outfits—"

Pat jerked his head without giving a direct reply, still cautiously withholding a snap judgment. But that he had been rolling the matter over was attested some time later by a question he put to the rancher.

"One of those four men who hired out to drive your herd to the railroad wasn't a Mexican, by any chance?" he asked thoughtfully.

"Looked like he mighta been." Christian nodded. "Dark-faced an' sort o' sullen-lookin', he was. Seemed to be makin' an effort t' dress American, an' missin' it by a mile."

"But he didn't let drop any Spanish in your hearing?"

"No, Stevens, he didn't."

Ezra was following this exchange with attention. "What yuh drivin' at?" he queried, eyeing Pat.

The other's response was notable for its indirection. "Look around you, Ez," he invited casually. "Anythin' at all familiar about this country—or the trail we're followin'?"

The big fellow gazed about him in evident puzzlement, but Sam Sloan was quick enough to catch on.

"I get it," he exclaimed, in a tone of discovery. "We're on the Outlaw Trail—headin' straight for the wildest part o' the Panhandle. . . . You're askin' yoreself if them woolly rustlers ain't makin' for the Mexican border, tight as they kin travel," he challenged Stevens, triumphantly.

Pat's nod of assent was not delayed. Max Christian groaned aloud as the significance of this possibility dawned on him.

"Good criminy, Stevens!" he got out with an effort. "Once they git behind that bear trap, we're licked!"

"I don't know," Pat objected reasonably. "It's a long haul from here to the border, Christian. There's grounds for believin' we'll catch up long before they ever get that far—"

The rancher's unhappy expression showed that he hoped so, but pessimism weighed him down as they proceeded.

Afternoon of another day found them well into the Texas

Panhandle. A long, faint penciling of cliffs lying athwart the horizon finally dissolved into the great Cap Rock, the ragged, straggling border of the Staked Plain. The trail of the cattle swung east around this imposing barrier, clinging to better pasturage, and avoiding the barren deserts which lay to the south and west.

There was only the one direction to follow here, and though they pulled up in the rose-hued afterglow for a skimpy supper, boiling their coffee over a fire of paper-dry buffalo chips, night saw them shoving on indefatigably. The stars gleamed like lanterns in this thin, clear atmosphere. After a time they faded, and a luminous yellow disk lifted above the eastern skyline, flooding the endless range with ghostly light. Long, velvety shadows shortened as the moon rose higher.

"Clear as daylight—an' it may trick them hombres into shovin' on long after they should haul up," Ezra muttered hopefully. All afternoon his unusual alertness had demonstrated his belief that the rustlers enjoyed less of a lead than they seemed to fancy.

The wide, gently undulating prairie gave way at length to rougher country. Buttes lifted on every hand, and an occasional ridge rose across the plain like a frozen wave. The four men crossed a sandy wash running out from the lofty Cap Rock, and were climbing to the level again, when Pat suddenly lifted a hand for attention. All paused to listen.

The faint, breeze-shredded bellow of a cow drifted to them from the distance. So thin as to be almost inaudible, it seemed to come from miles away.

"Mebby it's jest a stray," murmured Christian, his stubbled jaws tightening. Lack of tobacco, which had run out on them the previous day, was rendering his temper short and his fondest hopes dark indeed.

But as they waited, the lonely bellow came to them again, in a different key.

"Take a climb up the rocks here, Sam," Pat directed, in-

dicating the weathered wall at their backs. "See if you can spot anythin', before we barge in and spoil our hand."

Sam dismounted and stole away, his form blending with the wavering shadows as he clambered upward. Only the faintest rattling of dislodged dirt and pebbles came back, gradually dying away. He returned inside of twenty minutes.

"Big grassy basin a mile ahead," he announced portentously. "They're holdin' the herd there—"

"They've posted a night guard, of course?" Pat caught him up.

Sloan spread his hands. "Too far t' tell for sure. I did make out a man stationed on yonder butte—probably set t' watch their back trail." He pointed out the place.

Pat thought it over without haste. "I'm goin' up there," he decided, with characteristic calm. "The rest of yuh wait here, an' we won't tip our hand. I won't be long."

Ezra started to voice a protest, but Pat was gone before he could make himself heard. Threading the mottled shadows under the rim of the Cap Rock, the nerveless range man worked toward the butte which Sloan had indicated.

The silence here lay heavy, and he abandoned his bronc near its base lest an unguarded click of hoofs on the loose stones betray his position and purpose. Climbing the butte, Pat moved as noiselessly as an Indian, without disturbing the rocks scattered about through the centuries, ready to tumble down at a touch.

A winding gully gave access to the top on this side. Time drew out as he worked patiently upward. At last he drew near the top. His caution increased now to the length of locating a rocky background to shield his movements before he ventured to lift his head for a wary examination of the butte's crown.

A guard had been posted here, as Sloan said. Pat was startled to find the other only a half-dozen yards away, seated on a rock, and luckily gazing the other way. There was something vaguely familiar about the set of that head, outlined

against the pale sky; and when the fellow turned, showing his face, Pat was already past the point of being greatly surprised to recognize the puncher, last seen on the Colorado range, who had called himself Jack Ambler.

Pat's eyes narrowed. While not unexpected, this meeting served at least one useful purpose in placing Ambler as a member of Dyer's gang without any further question.

As if vaguely conscious of some hostile presence nearby, Ambler half-rose from his seat, peering about. He sank back finally, but seemed to remain uneasy. Pat halted his stealthy, crawling advance, concealed behind a rock ten feet away from the puncher. Preparing himself for action, he suddenly spoke up.

"Don't turn your head, Ambler," he warned in a guarded undertone. "There's a gun trained on yuh. Freeze if yuh value your skin. . . . Are yuh alone here?"

A shock ran over the young fellow's taut frame, but he quickly controlled his surprise. "It's that Stevens, ain't it? . . . Yuh don't need to worry," he muttered tightly. "I'm alone—and a hell of a watchdog I turned out t' be," he burst out with harsh self-accusation.

Pat continued to study narrowly Ambler's every word and movement, alert for possible treachery. Had he been pressed, he might have had difficulty in explaining his next words. "Sorry to find a man of your cut mixed up in this business, Ambler," he commented. "Not that I'm surprised any, after what we found yuh doin' on the Block VC. Our mistake was in lettin' yuh go then."

"Wal, yuh know yuh could be dead wrong 'bout this whole thing, too," returned Jack, moved by some strange inner urgency. "Be careful how yuh play this. Don't sell me short! . . . You're after them Cross Ladder steers yonder, I reckon." His tone steeled. "I hope yuh do grab the herd, Stevens," he burst out fiercely. "But don't try to hold me! I'm warnin' yuh while there's time!"

Pat chuckled jarringly. "If this is an argument for lettin' yuh go, you're wasting your breath."

He broke off at a faint sound of rattling stones coming from behind him. He was in no position to be caught between two fires. If it proved to be Ambler's shady friends . . .

"What is it, Stevens?" Ambler whipped out, as Pat stared down into the shadowy rocks. "I won't stand for you and yore pardners grabbin' me here. I told yuh that!"

The last thing Pat expected was to catch a glimpse of Sam Sloan's piratical head, thrust over a bowlder some yards farther down the slope. Ezra and Max Christian appeared to be with him. Made restless by the long delay, they had decided to follow without reckoning the possible consequences.

"Sam! Ezra! Lay low—" Pat hurriedly motioned them back. But catching a flash of Ambler atop the butte, they refused stubbornly to listen, bursting from cover and rushing upward.

Ambler saw them coming. His Colt .45 streaked out of the leather as he backed hastily away.

"Don't yuh do it, boy!" Ezra roared, catching the glint of the metal. "We'll swamp yuh an' tear yore head off!"

The warning came too late. Ambler's gun flashed and cracked, two shots reverberating hollowly in the night. There was not time to question whether he intended to shoot his attackers, although the slugs flew wild.

Next instant, Ambler went down in a welter of flying arms and legs, as iron hands laid hold of him, tearing the gun from his grasp and making it impossible for him to do more than struggle ineffectually.

"Let me go! I swear you'll be sorry for this," he managed to sob before he gave up and lay still.

5.

"What was the idea of firin' them warnin' shots?" Sam Sloan blazed, glaring down at the pinioned captive.

Ambler shook his head dourly. "If yuh think I was aimin' to warn Rip McGill, you're dead wrong," he forced out, as if scarcely expecting to be believed.

"Then yuh was tryin' to down us. Is that it?" Ezra caught him up shortly.

"No, no!" the young fellow exclaimed vehemently. "I—Well, think what yuh want to. Yuh will anyway!" He lapsed into hopeless silence.

"I never seen yuh before," Max Christian told him thinly, staring down at his tense face. "Why're yuh botherin' t' lie to us?"

"It's not a lie! I mean—" Once more Ambler subsided.

Pat was forced to admit to himself that the boy's talk sounded ambiguous, to say the least. He sensed a mystery here and, alone with the other, would have attempted to draw Ambler out. In the present state of affairs, however, it would not have been logical even to try.

"Wal, it's up to us now," Sam declared curtly. "However they might've been meant, them shots tipped off the rustlers. Either they're on their way up here t' investigate, or they'll be busy takin' off fer other parts—"

Christian jerked a nod. "We knockin' this rat on the head an' shovin' off—or do we bother to tie 'im up?"

The whole tone of this speech went against the grain with Pat, but he was forced to admit the full justification of Christian's attitude. How could leniency be asked for young Ambler in face of the facts?

"We'll tie him up an' leave him here," Pat said reluctantly.

"We can only hope some of his friends don't come huntin' for him. . . . I know this boy, Christian, an' I'll have more to say to him when the time can be spared. It can't now."

Ambler was quickly trussed up, by the use of his own belt and such other fastenings as could be laid hold of in a hurry. Watching from the rim of the butte, the Cross Ladder rancher reported hurried activities in progress below in the basin where the cattle were being held. He urged strongly for a departure without further delay.

"Okay. We kin take off," Sloan muttered, rolling Ambler over for a final look at his bonds.

Jack said nothing, turning his head awkwardly to watch as they started to scramble down the rough side of the butte. It was hard going in the treacherous half-light. More than one of them sustained a skinned shin or elbow in their haste to return to their horses.

Once astride, they forced the ponies to a mad run, skirting the base of the butte as they made pellmell for the wide basin beyond. The moon had begun its decline, the deceptive shadows inevitably slowing them up.

Hauled up on the basin's ragged rim, they scanned the dim abyss below.

"Dang that ornery Ambler anyway!" Ezra sang out wrathfully. "He's tipped 'em off, all right. There they go—"

He was right. As they looked, the last of the rustled Cross Ladder steers could be seen pouring through a rocky gateway on the far edge of the basin. Hard-riding men, their yells coming back faintly on the breeze, could be seen hazing them on.

"We'll git over there fast!" burst out Max heavily. "We may be able t' block 'em in the canyons—"

They poured down the gentle slope of the basin, not sparing their mounts. The distance proved greater than appearances would have led a man to expect. The last of the steers had disappeared from sight twenty minutes before

they ranged near the crag-festooned canyon mouth. Pat was in the lead, and he prudently approached on an oblique course, the character of the gateway obviously suggesting the possibility of an ambush.

It was well he did so. Stevens was still a hundred yards from the rocky passage when gunfire abruptly freckled the shadows over there with blinking flecks of orange light.

Ezra emitted a bellow of wrath. "That does it!" he roared. "Why, Pat, two men in there with rifles kin stand us all off! This is a freeze-out if we don't do somethin' about it quick!"

Hauled up in the cover of a pile of rocks, Pat was sizing up the situation shrewdly. The clifflike walls on either side of the canyon mouth were too precipitous to scale. It looked very much as if the outlaws had stalemated them once more.

Sam had his carbine out and was probing the thick shadows inside the dusky canyon. That the rustlers could see more clearly than they could be seen was proved by the glancing whine of their bullets, bouncing off the rockpile with almost monotonous regularity.

Max Christian lowered his gun after fruitlessly trying to silence the rustlers. Any attempt to dislodge that foe before daylight seemed hopeless.

"Easy, Christian," Pat called in warning, seeing the cattleman fiddle with his horse. "Don't make the mistake of tryin' a dash over there, no matter how mad yuh feel! They'll blast yuh out of the saddle before yuh even know it's coming!"

"We gotta do somethin', Stevens!" Max exclaimed desperately. He was forlornly aware of his herd, speedily putting distance behind it with every passing minute; and tragically aware of his inability to do anything about it.

"This'll come straight yet," Pat assured him levelly. "If only we don't go off half-cocked. Bad as it looks, those steers of yores haven't got wings. We're a whole lot closer than when we started."

"Sure—" Christian made a useless grab at his hat, sent sailing by a chance slug from the canyon wall. "Still an' all,

I'd give half my ranch t' drill one o' them scoundrels between the eyes right now!"

Pat turned to Sam. "If we're goin' to be held up here, might's well put the time to good use," he said shortly. "You and Ez get back there an' pick young Ambler up. Bring him along with yuh. Will yuh do that?"

For answer, Sloan turned to his horse at once. "Let's go, Ez." He was curt. "I only hope that fool youngster gives us a ghost of an argument. I'd plumb admire to pound sense into his stubborn head—"

"Never mind the rough stuff," Pat called after them. "Just bring him here—"

The pair swung astride and rode off at a brisk clip. They lost no time in returning to the butte where Ambler had been left and, leaving their horses below, began to clamber upward.

Ezra was the first to win to the top by virtue of his lanky legs. When Sam puffed up to the crest, scarlet with effort, it was to find his tall partner stalking here and there, canvassing the top of the butte and muttering to himself.

"Where's Ambler?" Sam panted, gazing about. "What yuh done with 'im, Ez?"

"What did *I* do with him!" the redhead blazed back, with blistering contempt. "You're only the one who did most of the tyin'. A hot job yuh turned in, I must say!"

Sam stared. "Yuh mean he got away?"

"Yuh want me t' send yuh a telegram, charges collect?" Ezra roared angrily. "Sure he's gone! Ain't a sign of him here! Prob'ly he was makin' tracks, an' laughin' at us, ten minutes after we left!"

"That's right! Blame it on me! I'm handy at least," Sloan said hotly. "You didn't do nothin' but look them knots over after I finished tyin' 'im up—"

"Why, you sawed-off mushhead!" Ezra bawled. "I got a mind t' pull yore leg off an' beat yuh over the head with it—only it might wake yuh up!"

Cocky little bantam that he was, Sam confronted the big man fiercely. "Lemme see yuh try anythin' of the sort! I been honin' for a good crack at yuh. This is my chance t' cut yuh down to size—"

Roweled by real concern over the loss of their captive, both were about as worked up as they ever became. They were on the verge of springing together, releasing their mutual exasperation in an exchange of blows, when a shadow glided swiftly between.

"Quit it." It was Pat Stevens. Following on an afterthought, he had arrived just in time. "Any more of this foolishness, an' *I'll* walk out on yuh. . . . Ambler's gone, I see. Bad luck. Somebody got to him, of course—I should have foreseen as much." He grunted. "Can't be helped now. We may catch up with him another time. Forget it, an' we'll get back before Max Christian lands himself in real trouble."

They clambered down and raced across the basin, and half an hour later were looking the canyon wall over, exchanging a desultory fire with the ambushed rustlers.

Christian growled his displeasure on hearing the news of Ambler's disappearance. "We ain't got a chance," he muttered lugubriously. "Them birds are way ahead of us at every jump." The others paid him no heed, busy with their own concerns.

"There's a ledge, with a gully runnin' down, a quarter-mile along the wall," Ezra informed Pat, coming to his side. "Yuh want I should climb that, an' work in behind them fellers?"

Pat's delay was of the briefest. "You're sure it can be climbed?" he demanded curtly.

"I kin. Dunno about bench-legs, here—" Ezra jabbed a thumb in Sam's direction.

Pat ignored the weak attempt at levity. "We'll all go," he decided quickly. "If those two bushwhackers stay where they are, there can't be more than a couple of others with the

herd—three at the outside. We may be able to turn the tables an' surprise 'em. It's worth a try."

Sloan stayed behind to create a diversion by exchanging a few last shots with the rustlers while the others made a dash for the protection of the wall. At a guarded whistle signal, he turned and, swinging astride his pony, jogged off deliberately in their wake. Whether the ambushers were aware of this move or not, their fire continued for some minutes to rake the empty rocks.

"Up here—" Ezra indicated a shadowy break in the irregular wall. He thrust his horse boldly into the crevice, and the others followed, the ponies taking their time as they picked their way over the treacherous rubble.

The gully angled upward, winding here and there. Soon they were in the deeper shadows of the bastions looming on all sides. There was no sound save the blowing of the horses, and the scrape of iron shoes on the rocks.

They struck into the ledge which Ezra had spotted, and this led them back toward the open. There was no way to discover with certainty where they were going, but they were working steadily upward. Now and again forced to dismount and lead the ponies across a dangerous spot, they toiled on. Time flew by, and it surprised them at last to watch a rosy glow appear in the east. The moon faded over the horizon and the stars paled.

"We're losin' time, Stevens!" Max exclaimed gruffly, staring about. "It's comin' on for dawn—"

Pat examined the rocky maze into which they had wandered. Indeed they seemed to be getting nowhere fast, if they were not altogether lost. "No help for it, Christian," he returned cheerfully. "It was either this, or wait it out back there. We're almost at the top now," he added.

Ezra led the way out of the rocky jumble into the midst of a worse confusion. The top of this mesa, if mesa it was, proved more rugged than anything they had hitherto encountered. Pinnacles and ragged spires rose all about them;

weathered yellow walls cut them off; cracks and crevices forced them to turn back.

"Know where you're goin'?" Sam asked Ezra, with scant respect.

"Who could've guessed we'd find this washboard up here?" retorted the lanky one acrimoniously. "I'm doin' the best I kin. Mebby you kin lead us to them steers any quicker?"

"How kin I do that," Sam snorted, "when I dunno where we are, let alone the cattle?"

Ezra said no more, but he appeared to take his failure to heart. "Yuh wanta turn back?" he demanded, addressing himself to Pat when another half-hour had strengthened the coming day and they were still no nearer to finding themselves in the open.

Pat waved him on. "This is just damned bad luck, Ez," he responded mildly. "But it's nobody's fault. We're sure to climb out of this sometime. I say plug along."

True to his prediction, midmorning saw them out of the badlands and skirting the raw shoulders of a range of hills. They had only the vaguest idea where they were until Pat pointed out the high, ragged fringe of the Cap Rock, marching away unwaveringly across the west.

"Lord knows where that canyon comes out," he said. "And anyway, it's certain the herd didn't waste a minute shovin' on. We'll push south and hope for luck. We may be able to spot it, though I don't expect much in this wind."

With the dawn, a stiff breeze had sprung up, soon growing as hot as the breath of a furnace and steadily increasing in strength. Almost a daily occurrence in this arid desert country, it came straight out of the south into their faces. Banners of dust whipped up from the dun ridges and rose swirling off the flats, laying a haze over the brassy sky. It all but destroyed their hope of detecting the dust of the traveling herd at any distance.

Late that afternoon, their fortunes brightened when Ezra once more picked up the trail of the herd. It had passed by

here hours before, the faint imprints already half-filled with sand, but there could be no mistaking the sign.

"Reckon we're on the Outlaw Trail again," Sam declared significantly. "An' drivin' straight toward the border."

There could be no questioning his rightness. Old signs of travel in the worn rock were observable on every hand. Moreover, the course they followed led through barren, uninhabited land notoriously favored by outlaws on the run.

Not that night did they once more overtake the Cross Ladder stock. Warned now of close pursuit, the cattle thieves were pushing ahead at their best speed. Nor were there any signs of a rear guard set to cover their path. Every man of them had been sternly employed in hustling the weary steers along.

"What's the idea? Why not push on while we're close," Christian protested when the end of that day forced a halt in the fast-fading sunset light. Ezra, leading once more, didn't bother to argue the point.

"Take yore rest while yuh kin," he growled.

It was well that they did not allow zeal to urge them on beyond reason. Early the following morning, the one-eyed tracker quickly spotted the point where the Cross Ladder beeves had been swung off the Outlaw Trail, in such a manner as to conceal their tracks partially. It would have been easy to overshoot the spot, traveling by night.

"Somethin's up," announced Ez. "What yuh reckon this means?"

"They may be pullin' off the trail to haul up for a spell," Pat hazarded. "Or it may mean something else altogether. We'll soon learn."

The trail led east down the hills, and they eventually found themselves in the midst of tolerable rangeland. By early afternoon they had begun to spot single cows lurking in the brushy folds. Sam went out of his way to read the brands on several.

"Batwing, I make it," he told the others. "They ain't Christian's steers. Must be some big spread located in here."

An hour later, from a rise they spotted a considerable herd grazing along a trickling creek. They were yet far away, but Christian's leathery face tightened up at sight of them.

"That's my stuff, Stevens," he declared without hesitation.

"Nobody watchin' 'em, neither," Ezra growled, rendered ill-tempered by something he could not wholly understand. "Somethin' mighty queer 'bout this—"

They rode down for a closer look. The Cross Ladder rancher had not been mistaken. These were his rustled cattle, grazing unattended on this strange range. They speculated soberly on whether the rustlers, close pressed as they were, had abandoned the stock here and given up.

"Ain't at all like 'em," declared Ezra shortly. "Some trick t' this, as usual. I dunno what."

They were not long in learning, Sam Sloan abruptly reining in to call Pat's attention to two punchers riding toward them from the south. Sweeping the grassy slopes with slitted eyes, Pat espied others closing in. There were nearly a dozen of these riders, all told. They rode quietly, their faces resolute, watching the four men before them alertly for the first break. One, who may have been a foreman, pushed forward coolly.

"What outfit is this?" Pat called to him.

"Batwing," was the unyielding answer. "What's yore interest in our cows, stranger?"

"*Yore* cattle?" Christian almost exploded, turkey red of face. "Sure of that, are yuh?"

"Sure enough. We jest bought 'em. Might's well get used to the idea, old-timer—if yuh got any contrary notions."

A portentous silence fell, broken harshly by Sam.

"Rip McGill!" He brought out the detested name like a curse. "Blast his liver an' lights! God knows where he is now—but he's worked another switch on us. An' this one's a honey!"

6.

The Batwing ramrod continued to watch them with a narrow interest.

"Never heard of this McGill party you're blowin' about," he said crisply. "But it don't signify. You're off the reservation, all four of yuh—"

"Dammit, man," Christian burst out wrathfully. "It's you that's on the wrong foot! Cross Ladder is my brand! These steers were hazed off my home range less'n a week ago, without my knowledge—we've tracked 'em 'way from Colorado! Don't talk like a damned fool!"

Seeing the Batwing spokesman's bronzed countenance darken several shades, Pat thought it time to interfere. "You'll have to excuse Christian's talk," he told the ramrod smoothly. "He's been handled pretty rough in the past few days, an' he's understandably hot under the collar. Yuh can take my word for it, this really is his beef—"

"Skip it," came the reply, cutting across Pat's talk like the rasp of a file. "This big front ain't gettin' yuh nowheres. Mebby yuh didn't hear me say Batwing owns them steers—an' that's flat!"

Pat did not miss the steady increase of tension here. Several Batwing riders had drifted up behind them, their faces hard. Ezra looked around with scowling indignation as guns made their appearance. Sam heard the soft snick of cocking hammers as well. Both were too wise to make any false movements.

Pat was shaking his head at the Batwing foreman, with a sorrowful smile. "No, my friend. Yuh must know yuh can't make this stick. Why, this stock you're laying claim to is registered under Christian's name. There can't be any ques-

tion about it whatever. Yuh only have to consult the Colorado brand registry to settle the point."

"Saw it off short, Conroy!" a Batwing puncher called to the stony-faced ramrod. "We've heard this song an' dance before! No sense in goin' all through it again!"

There could be no denying the sharp-edged temper of these men. Continued thievery, without recourse to any effective enforcement of the law, rendered them prone to take matters into their own hands with scant attention to the formalities.

Conroy stared at Pat with cynical eyes. "You're way off beat, mister man," he droned flatly. "I ain't questionin' who this Cross Ladder stuff *did* belong to, a day or so back. Christian himself sold the herd to Batwing, if you're interested. We got his bill of sale. It's jest yore misfortune to show up now with a man pretendin' to be him!"

Christian vented a bellow of fury that might have been heard a mile away. "That's the last straw!" he fumed. "McGill not only skins my range! Now he's passin' hisself off as me—pocketin' my money—even signin' my name!"

Pat had grown stern as the damning situation became clear. "Conroy," he said sharply, "I advise yuh not to overplay this. You take us for rustlers—an' yuh never were more mistaken. Meanwhile, the real thieves are makin' tracks away from here by the minute. . . . Call in your owner—or your sheriff, if yuh won't listen to me. We'll straighten this out in a hurry!"

A thin smile wreathed Conroy's cold mouth. "Crooks have a rep for talkin' themselves out of a tight," he observed. "But you birds ain't doin' it. . . . Let yore guns slide down," he snapped abruptly. "Quick! Before I change my mind what to do about yuh—"

Winchesters and sixguns were trained on them from several directions, at a pointblank range calculated to allow of few misses. There seemed no choice but to comply. Looking about ready to suffer a stroke, Christian unbuckled his belt and let it slip down. The partners followed suit, taking their time about it, Pat alone refusing to be coerced.

"Not a chance, Conroy," he intoned slowly. His gray eyes met the other's without flinching. "It's you who've made up your mind I'm a bad actor. . . . Shove over here an' lift my guns yoreself—if you're not afraid." His tone was covertly taunting. "What's the delay? You've got plenty of cover—"

Conroy advanced warily. It was plain to all that in a pinch his coarse fiber could not measure up to Pat's cold steel. Their eyes clashed as the ramrod gingerly lifted Steven's Colt and yanked his saddle gun out of the boot as if afraid it would bite. Conroy backed his pony away, his face a study in frustration and anger.

"Pick up them other guns, Shep," he directed one of his men.

The Batwing crew had closed in, their arms now openly trained on the four captives. One of them slid down and retrieved the weapons on the ground. He remounted.

Conroy roughly cut off any further attempt at a parley. "All right. Turn yore broncs an' get movin'." He gestured in the direction he wanted them to proceed, and the cavalcade moved off at an unhurried walk.

Left in the dark as to where they were being taken, or for what purpose, Pat and his friends did not let slip the opportunity to scan their captors with curious attention. This crew had the look of a common cow outfit, nothing more. It seemed unlikely there could be any hook-up between them and the outlaws. At the same time, none needed to be reminded how swiftly these heavy-handed punchers might explode into senseless and bloody violence.

A ride of half an hour brought them at length to a line camp in a draw. Pat saw the pole corrals, scarred by use, and a moment later spotted the sod shack backed up against the barranca.

"All right," Conroy grated as they hauled up. "Slide down an' line up there."

They stood motionless, their hands half-elevated, while

a Batwing hand went over them more carefully in search of concealed weapons.

"They're clean," he announced, stepping back.

Conroy waved toward the soddie. "Inside, the lot of yuh!" he growled.

Pat stalled. "You're holdin' us here while yuh get word to yore headquarters, I hope—?"

"Hell, no! It'll be all over by the time word gets that far, friend," was the callous retort. "Come on! Get in there with the others—"

Still Pat delayed stubbornly. "You're making' a big mistake, Conroy." His tone was urgent. "I'll point it out to yuh again when the time comes!"

"Move, rustler—an' shut up!" the ramrod ordered brutally. For an instant he looked more than half-ready to bat Stevens over the head with his gun barrel. Then he shrugged.

"At least talk this over with yore owner," Pat called back from the low doorway. "It still ain't safe to mishandle innocent men, Conroy. Don't make it harder for yoreself than yuh need to."

His insistence would have given pause to many a sterner man, but Conroy only waved his arm angrily. A Batwing puncher slammed the slab door shut, and the four were prisoners.

"A nice note, this is," Sam Sloan groused. He did not doubt that they would eventually escape from their dilemma, but the delay wore heavily on his nerves.

"Conroy could be a silent member o' McGill's crowd," Ezra said sourly. "Batwing was awful ready t' take over Christian's stock, with no questions asked!"

Pat said, "It's a damned nuisance all around. But we know where the cattle are, at least."

"Unless McGill an' Dyer take up where they left off, knowin' we're outa the way," old Max inserted gloomily. "They could have them beeves over the border before we git outa here."

Their prison was shadowy and dim, and not overlarge for four big men. Only a little light stole in through the cracks around the slab door, and no single aperture was large enough to admit of an uninterrupted view outside. There was no lock on the door, inside or out, but they had heard a bar drop against the outer side as it slammed to, acting as a prop. Doubtless a guard would be posted to watch them closely.

They fell silent, hoping to catch some scraps of conversation outside as Conroy issued instructions to his men. But beyond a droning murmur at intervals, nothing could be distinguished. They fell to discussing their plight in low tones, seated on two rickety bunks facing each other across the narrow room.

"They've got us down for rustlers playin' a smooth game," Pat declared. "But Conroy ain't dead sure—I could tell that from his toughness—and I ground it into him. His own nagging doubts will force him to go slow."

"We waitin' till his bullhide conscience moves him t' do somethin' about this?" Ezra interjected roughly. "We'll be stuck here till the rains melt this dirt roof—"

Sam was gazing about speculatively as he listened. "Sod walls an' a dirt roof," he muttered. "That hadn't ought t' hold a parcel o' grown men long, come dark."

Pat measured the strength of the light seeping in around the door before replying. "Sam's partly right, at least." His words were barely audible. "It's late afternoon now. We'll be able to make our play later. Just don't overlook that our guards'll probably think of the same thing—an' we'll have t' plan accordingly."

"What's yore scheme?" Christian prodded, lifting his dejected head.

For some minutes Pat's whisper barely reached their straining ears as he outlined what he had in mind. It was a ticklish hope at best, and there were one or two objections, as quickly ironed out. Afterward they stretched out on the bunks, to rest and await the proper time for action.

At long last the light from the door faded out. They smelled the smoke of a cookfire from outside, which later dissipated. Their own food remained in their saddle rolls and no attempt was made to feed them, but they possessed themselves in patience. The night dragged on interminably, none of them caring to doze off. When Pat at last rose cautiously, to alert the others with a touch, all were ready in a twinkling.

"All set," Pat murmured in Ezra's ear. "Let's get about it—"

With his pocketknife, the gangling redhead attacked the yielding sod wall behind his bunk. Dirt rattled down softly, which he endeavored to catch. Now and again he paused to listen.

For several hours no sound had been heard from without. But none doubted that a vigilant guard lay in wait out there. Just as Ezra's blade broke through the foot-thick wall of entangled grass and roots and hard-packed earth, with a faint clink of falling pebbles outside, the guard's bellowing voice could be heard, lifted in wrathful warning.

"Lay off in there, whatever you're doin'!" he cried. A muffled shot crashed out. "Gouge into that wall, an' you're just bustin' through into hell!"

Ezra had already abandoned this particular effort to gain attention. Quickly grabbing up a loose board from the bunk, he rammed it against the pole beams of the low roof. Dust sifted down, and the entire structure groaned and rocked.

It was enough to set the guard outside into a frenzy. Uncertain what to look for next, he expected the worst, his yell rising to a pitch of rage. As Pat had expected and planned, a moment later there came a rattling at the door as the prop was knocked away. Next instant, the slab barrier swung violently back.

Sam lay crouched in ambush at the very edge of the door. As the angry guard barged in, a lantern swinging in one fist and a menacing gun in the other, Sam launched his attack. Before the guard fairly knew what was happening, he

sprawled on the rammed-earth floor, his lantern flickering out, while Pat made a wild grab for his gun.

That maneuver was blocked as Sam rose to rush past the struggling guard and dart out the door. He made it, almost knocking Pat off his feet in the process; but none of the others had time to follow. Quickly the guard rolled backward, clearing the door and throwing a wild shot behind him. An instant later he was on his feet, the orange blast of his sixgun stabbing through the pitch-dark doorway.

Pat, Ezra and Christian perforce swung themselves aside, out of the line of fire. It was Pat's hope that Sloan might succeed in downing the guard from behind. In vain! Soon another gun roared out there, joining in the attack. They heard confused cries and the slap of running feet, followed by the pounding tattoo of a racing horse. Abruptly the slab door slammed shut, the prop dropping into place with a thud.

"Sam made it, anyhow," Ezra growled unemotionally, when silence returned. "He'll bring help if he gits through—"

They waited long, hoping to catch some indication from outside that this was indeed the situation, but no voice or sound came to their probing ears. The minutes drew out into one hour, and then a second. A plank was barricaded against the hole in the sod wall. Wearily the trio lay down, each alone with his thoughts.

They were still wide-awake when dawn came trickling in at the battered door. Hunger was beginning to gnaw at them now. It was an hour later when voices, and the sound of horses, came to them once more. Presently a rattle sounded at the door. Pat rose to spring forward eagerly.

A gun appeared, in the grasp of a hard-jawed man, as the door swung open. "Stand back," he commanded uncompromisingly.

Slowly Pat backed away. Whatever he had expected, it was not this. His keen eyes were veiled as Sam Sloan, his clothes torn and his face looking freshly battered, was hustled forward by two stalwarts and thrust inside once more. He

met the startled gaze of his friends and shrugged apologetically.

"No matter, Sam." Pat's tone was soft. "Yuh made yore try. It's all right."

"Cornered me in the hills, they did," Sloan muttered. "I didn't stand a chance, in this strange country."

There was no need for further words. Their slim chance of escape appeared to have faded out effectually. Moreover, the attempt would likely be held against them.

They had no remotest idea what might follow next, but certainly none was prepared for anything of the kind when, toward noontime, boots grated outside and the door was cast open again.

"All right. Come on out," growled the grudging voice of Conroy, the Batwing ramrod.

They stepped out warily, without haste, blinking in the strong light. And now they saw the two men standing beside the foreman, one of them wearing a deputy's star on his vest. Ezra allowed a gusty sigh to escape him at that sight.

"Never did think I'd be so glad t' welcome the law," he exclaimed. "Wal! Things are lookin' up. Reckon this other gent's a stock inspector—"

"Keno," was the good-humored answer. "I dunno you gents, but Christian's face is familiar enough to me from previous meetin's. Howdy, Max!"

Christian, having driven beef herds to the Panhandle for sale in other years, greeted the inspector fervently.

"Yuh got here jest in time, Leathers," he said warmly. "Mebby you'll explain to Conroy, here, who I am—"

"I've already done that, Christian." The other man nodded. From his manner, he enjoyed a complete grasp of the tangled situation, having already gone far toward righting it. "He's aware of his mistake, an' is prepared to turn yore herd over to yuh without any strings attached. Batwing stands t' lose by it, o' course, but it's not your fault. Needless to say, all hands are sorry this had t' happen."

The deputy nodded to Pat easily. "That goes for you and yore friends, too," he advised. "Any charges against yuh are withdrawn—and I'm hopin' you're sensible 'nough not to see it the other way around," he added significantly.

"I've no hard feelings," Pat answered promptly. "Nor have my sidekicks. With Christian's herd recovered, our work here is done an' we want only to get on our way."

There was further talk, calculated to smooth ruffled feelings all around, from which Conroy notably held aloof. Pat, unwilling to let it rest that way, nodded in the foreman's direction.

"I want to offer my respects to Conroy here, before it's passed over and forgot," he said. "I can't hold any of these boys t' blame for a perfectly natural mistake. But we were in an ugly spot, and but for Conroy's good sense we'd still be in it. . . . I take it he *did* ride to town and make inquiries, before takin' further action in regard to us?"

There was an embarrassed pause, saying plainer than words that Conroy had, in point of fact, done nothing of the kind. Some other agency had been responsible for the release from their predicament, and Pat was left to guess as best he could the true answer to the enigma.

Leathers, the stock inspector, smoothed over the awkward moment by speaking up. "Conroy's as sorry as anybody about this business," he asserted easily. "And to prove it, he's already agreed to supply men to help drive Christian's Cross Ladder stock home again. Yuh can't ask handsomer than that." The matter seemed closed there, like a slammed door. But Leathers' voice flowed on smoothly. "We'll ride over to Batwing headquarters now, if you're agreeable, an' wind up the final details wth Cass Bonnard."

7.

The Batwing headquarters ranch house was a rambling, one-story adobe and timber building sprawled in the thin shade of a grove of gnarled mesquite trees. Observing half a dozen men ride into the yard, a Mexican servant slipped quietly inside, and before they had drawn rein before the house a chubby, red-cheeked cattleman with white hair haloing his shiny scalp emerged to the gallery. This was Cass Bonnard, the owner.

"Howdy, Bonnard," the stock inspector began, and proceeded to introduce Pat, Christian, and the partners. "Sorry to bring bad news about that fine herd yuh bought yesterday. Christian, here, turned up to claim his stock. Reckon there ain't much yuh can do but turn it over to him, Cass."

Bonnard measured Max with an amiable eye. Having already got wind of his misfortune, he showed no surprise.

"My own fool fault, Christian." He nodded ruefully. "If I'd thought to call Leathers in when that owlhoot passed hisself off as you last night, I'd be in the clear now."

"Wal, it's decent of yuh to see it that way," allowed Max gruffly.

"Nonsense. Stickin' together is the only defense honest cowmen've got. . . . I've been lookin' yore steers over, Christian," Bonnard pursued tentatively. "Purty fair blood strain. Seems a shame to flog 'em north acrost that desert again—"

"Yes?"

Bonnard leaned forward to give weight to his words. "I've already taken a lickin' on that herd." He mentioned the very fair price he had paid the rustlers, lost to him now. "I was wonderin' if you'd consider a further offer for leavin' 'em

where they are—an' give me a chance to get back some of my money?"

Max considered. He well knew that he stood to lose a number of head in any attempt to drive the cattle home in their weakened condition, whereas, allowed to remain here, they would soon be in their prime again.

"Why—perhaps so," he acknowledged. "I dunno if I kin afford to be as handsome as you, Bonnard. But I'm willin' to dicker."

They were not long in coming to an agreement, despite Christian's pretense of caution. Bonnard closed the deal at once in hard cash, anxious to insure his claim to the steers, and the Colorado rancher professed himself more than satisfied.

Dinner call interrupted further proceedings. They sat down to a hearty meal of fried steaks. Afterward, Christian cornered Pat and the partners, paying them generously for their services to date and adding his warm thanks. Bonnard and Leathers, the Panhandle stock inspector, joined them a moment later. The deputy sheriff had already departed about his affairs.

"I hear you played a big part in trackin' them Cross Ladder steers down, Stevens—an' nearly grabbed the rustlers to boot," Bonnard began without preamble. "I don't mind sayin' I've my own grudge against them smooth crooks. Mebby you'll consider trackin' 'em down for good, at my expense."

Pat paid no attention whatever to the urgent nudge which Sam Sloan gave him. "Much obliged for the offer, Bonnard." He smiled. "As you know, McGill's owlhoots are still in possession of a number of prime horses belongin' to my friends here. The sum Christian paid us for helpin' to recover his steers more than covers the value of the horses. But that doesn't clear McGill and his cronies. It's only fair to tell yuh that we intend to go on anyway—the three of us. No point in yuh payin' us for a job we expect to do for ourselves."

"Wal, that's an honest answer," Bonnard exclaimed gruffly.

"I like yore style, Stevens. Wish yuh plenty of luck. Yuh can use it, if them blacklegs are headin' for the border."

There was more talk before Max Christian said his final good-byes and accompanied Leathers to town, on his long way home to Colorado. Pat and the partners delayed to discuss McGill's gang with Cass Bonnard. It was an hour later when they pulled away. With all trace of the outlaws lost, they headed for the town of Tascosa with the double purpose of procuring further supplies and picking up any possible clue to the route taken by the quarry.

They camped that night on the broad Texas prairie, and on the following morning rode down Tascosa Creek. Reached before noon, the famous Panhandle cowtown was by no means new to them. But they looked over the straggling sandy street, with its few tree-shaded stores and saloons, with interest. By no standard a metropolis, Tascosa was a busy place nevertheless, its buildings crowded with booted and spurred men. After racking their broncs under the gnarled cottonwood tree before the two-story, square hotel, the trio had their drink in the corner bar and emerged once more to the street.

"Yuh reckon there's a chance Dyer an' McGill rode this way?" Sam asked, as they stood scrutinizing the passing faces.

Pat shrugged. "Here she lays," he commented. "About the only town in three or four hundred miles of the woolliest range country there is. Find me an owlhoot that don't know old Tascosa like he knows his horse—"

Ezra's nod concurred. "As good a chance t' pick 'em up here as anywhere," he grunted.

But sauntering about for half an hour, curious about everything that went on, they saw no man whom they knew, except a grizzled frontiersman whom Pat had last met in Wyoming. They passed the time of day for a while, and parted. Sam was still glancing around at everyone in sight alertly, but his manner was no longer hopeful.

"Nobody here we know well 'nough t' ask for news of them fellers," he grumbled.

"We can always shove on down the Trail," returned Pat philosophically. "If they've pushed on themselves, we're bound to pick up their sign."

"Wal, we'll pick up what grub we need, an' shove off," growled Ezra restlessly. "Ain't nothin' for us here—"

Standing undecided in the doorway of a saddle shop, Pat was about to signify his assent to this proposal when he paused abruptly. The others saw his glance fix. He was looking upstreet at something, and they turned to follow his gaze.

Searching briefly, Ezra and Sam saw nothing like to hold his attention, unless it happened to be the girl emerging at that moment from a general store several doors above. There was a shy charm about her, instantly noticeable. Her dress was tattered but clean, and if her low-cut boots were scuffed, obvious efforts had been made to repair the damage. At least her dark hair was neatly brushed and coiled; and she did not look grubby, as so many of the poorer ranch women often did. Certainly those candid brown eyes held courage of a quiet kind.

Exactly the kind of a girl to attract Pat's interest, she had a bundle under her arm and seemed somewhat hurried in her actions. Even as she stepped off the store porch they saw a sauntering cowpuncher accost her familiarly. The girl halted, looking up at the fellow in blank surprise. It was clear from the expression on her face that she did not know him. And just as obviously, till this instant her thoughts had been far away. But the young man's intentions were plain enough.

Taking her hesitation for compliance, the puncher insinuated a casual arm about her waist. "How about takin' a little walk, honey?" Pat overheard his bantering invitation.

Indignant color rushed into the girl's dusky cheeks. "No, thanks!" Her refusal was short, and bore a scornful sting.

"Ah, come on. No harm done." He was carelessly per-

suasive. His arm drew tighter, urging her acquiescence with a mute appeal which not even she could mistake.

For answer, she squared on him determinedly and dealt him a smart blow with her small fist, squarely alongside the jaw.

"Good for you, sister." Pat's approving thought flickered behind his steely eyes and tightening lips.

"Now will you let me alone, freshie?" the girl blazed at her tormentor.

Laughing easily, he pretended to take her resistance for indecision. He was handsome—perhaps too handsome for his own good; black-headed, and with a devil in his audacious eye. Pat judged him not much older than the girl herself. The lack of toil-stains on his natty cowboy rig said that he was partial to town life, and probably he had grown used to another kind of girl than this one was proving herself to be.

"Relax, baby," he advised her boldly. "I don't mind a slap or two in a worthy cause, but I've got a rep to keep up—makin' the girls happy, and you're elected."

Try as he would to josh the situation through, he was no match for this girl's cool determination. Her set face said she was conning the question of how best to rid herself of this unwelcome pest. In another moment, Pat would have firmly and quietly relieved her of her problem. He had already started to move that way. But before he could cover the few remaining steps required to reach her side, another man rushed up, bursting out seemingly from nowhere.

Hard arms tore the black-headed cowpoke away from the girl and a fist smashed into his surprised face, sending him staggering backward.

"Get out of this, Julie!" the newcomer whipped at the girl. "Run! I'll take care of our ambitious friend here!"

"Wal, for gosh sakes!" It was Ezra, and he was staring at the young fellow who had thrown himself into the situation, in wide-eyed amazement. The others recognized Jack

Ambler as well—and only the girl called Julie appeared not at all surprised when he sprang to her assistance.

The luckless masher was having trouble in trying to recover his balance. Ambler strode forward, grimly pursuing his advantage. He blocked a furious swing aimed at his head by the bewildered puncher and countered with a smash to the stomach. Whatever his motive, Ambler appeared animated by a slashing determination to make this brief and final.

"Feel like arguin' the matter, do yuh?" he gritted. "Maybe you'd like t' slip yore arm around *my* waist, sweetheart, an' see how it feels!"

"What's this all about?" the handsome puncher panted, pausing to glare at his attacker fiercely. "I got no bone t' pick with you. I never even seen yuh before!"

Ambler would not let up on him, but crowded forward belligerently. "Yuh better hope yuh never run into me again, mister! Or else take a lot more pains in choosin' the girls yuh figure t' pester—"

"But hell! I only—" began the other, by no means anxious to force this fight. He got no further. A blow, slamming through his upraised defense, snapped his head back. He lost his temper then, realizing he was in for it, whether or no. With a snarl he plunged at Ambler viciously.

Men were advancing from every quarter to watch this contest. Gruff advice was called out, and the combatants were afforded plenty of room. Glancing over the crowd, Pat judged it was largely good-humored, and yet he scanned the gathering for any sign of Ambler's outlaw associates before his tension relaxed. His mind argued that, if they were not here, it was nonetheless likely that they were not very far away; and his first impulse was to press the search for them without delay. One thought held him in check. Ambler was here now. Why risk the chance of losing the young fellow again? In any event, there was always the likelihood that Ambler might lead the way to the larger quarry.

Jack stopped the puncher's charge with a double chop,

and they stood toe to toe, slugging heavily, trying to beat each other down. They were almost evenly matched as to weight, but a disinterested observer could scarcely have helped noting that Ambler held the advantage in bitter resolution. The other, so abruptly interrupted in his dalliance with Julie, bent on no more than an hour's pleasant diversion, appeared more nonplused than otherwise. Certainly he was having trouble in adjusting himself to the stern demands of the moment.

Yet his blood was up. Living in this town, and known to many of the men now offering him careless encouragement, he was clearly of no mind to accept a beating at the hands of a total stranger, without giving a good account of himself. Equally bent on teaching him a sound lesson, Ambler bored through the fellow's flailing blows, administering a painful thump squarely on the nose. The puncher vented a roar of fury. Springing forward, he grappled with Jack. Ambler succeeded in tripping him and down they went, rolling over and over in the dust.

The tide of battle turned this way and that. At a lucky turn the cowboy rose, astraddle Ambler's prostrate form, and proceeded to belt him unmercifully about the head and shoulders. The crowd gave a roar of delight and encouragement, when Julie sprang forward, to slam the young fellow in turn with her doubled fists, and knot her fingers in his curly black hair. Tugging manfully, her lips compressed into a thin line, she appeared bent on tumbling him over backward.

A grinning old-timer unhurriedly disengaged her hands and elbowed her back just as Ambler, dust-matted and smeared with blood now, with a mighty heave tumbled the puncher from his perch. The adversaries scrambled up, their clothing torn. Ambler drilled in without letup. A looping swing sent his foe reeling back into the crowd, which surged away, with a half-hearted attempt to prop up their favorite.

Jack was after him with a yell. He shouldered through the

scattering onlookers with a reckless disregard of his own safety. A body blow, brought up from Jack's heels, flattened the groaning cowpunch a second time. Men yelled, admiring Ambler's clear grit and determination in spite of themselves, and the street was a maelstrom of churning bodies.

Shoving through coolly, judging the fight about finished, Pat at length reached Julie's side. The girl stood panting, her magnificent eyes glittering and aroused. She looked up at him with protest as he took her arm.

"Let me get you out of this, miss," he said quietly. "It's almost over—and Ambler's proved he can take care of himself without our help."

His teeth showed briefly in a smile as he ended, and the girl could not forbear answering it. She recognized the allusion to her own excited, if misplaced, effort to come to Ambler's aid.

"Nice of you to think of me, mister," she murmured, as he urged her gently back out of the press. "But I'm really concerned for Jack, amongst all these strangers—"

Having allowed him to lead her to the edge of the crowd, there she stopped, and Pat wisely did not force the issue. "I'll admit to some interest in that young fellow myself," he allowed casually. "He certainly seems to know which side is up, an' how to stay there in a pinch. Known him long?"

She turned an unfathomable look on him which, in view of her reticent answer, he could only interpret as suddenly awakened caution.

"Long enough," she parried coolly. "Any special reason for askin'?"

Pat lifted his shoulders and let them drop. "Just wonderin' what he did, is all. I thought there was a chance I might offer to hire him," he thrust on unblushingly.

"You can't do that. He rides with my fath—" She broke off sharply, revealing confusion and plain regret over having said more than she meant to. "No matter," she went on resolutely. "I'm quite sure he wouldn't be interested, what-

ever your offer happened to be. . . . Thanks for lookin' out for me, mister." She turned away hurriedly. "I'll be all right. I reckon Jack's comin' now—"

But her attempt to escape his attention did not succeed so easily as that. "Hold on!" Pat good-naturedly caught up with her, and hung on. "We'll forget the job if you say so. But I'd like to talk to that young fellow for a minute anyway."

He caught the blaze of disappointment and chagrin in her trim small face, instantly erased. Next moment his notice was attracted elsewhere. Ambler had decisively concluded the demonstration of his prowess with his fists, and was coolly working his way out of the crowd. The defeated puncher's friends had him in charge, jibing him derisively, and Pat saw Ambler's auburn head bobbing as he started this way in search of Julie, shrugging off the congratulatory hands slapping him on the shoulders.

Jack's blazing blue eyes were darting this way and that, anxiously seeking the girl, as he came forward. He spotted Julie and Pat at the same time, and halted. A conflict of mingled eagerness and dismay struggled in his battered face. An instant later, whirling away, they saw him thrust off through the churning crowd in another direction.

"Ambler, wait! I want to see yuh," called Pat, striving to make himself heard.

But whether Ambler caught the words or not, he did not pause. The scattering crowd in the street was admirably suited to his purpose. Before Pat could make a move to pursue, Ambler slipped out of the jam and a moment later disappeared from view down an alley.

Pat's raking glance espied Ezra and Sam. The pair had observed Ambler's sudden about-face, and although they strove to make after him, they were too late. He was gone before they could win free from the hampering crowd in the street. Too wise to reveal the full extent of his disappoint-

ment, Pat turned to the girl, his eyes veiled. She was not disposed to be easy with him now.

"Reckon I said he'd not want any part of you—whoever you are," she spoke candidly. "But thanks anyway, for him and me both. I expect that settles it."

8.

"Well, I'll be darned!" Pat Stevens's tone was blandly surprised. "Ambler was headin' this way. Wonder what caused him to change his mind all of a sudden?"

Clearly the girl would have liked to pull away without further discussion. Yet she seemed wary of making an issue of the situation. "Dunno, mister. But I'll tell him about you, if I should happen to see him again." She made it sound improbable, and of no overwhelming importance in any event.

"The name is Stevens," Pat returned smoothly. "And a man can't help wonderin' what all the mystery is about—"

"Mystery?" she echoed blankly.

"Why, yes," he insisted. "I admitted a friendly interest in that young fellow—and you started to tell me something about him, and then quit. Not that I want to press yuh beyond your own wishes. But—"

She flushed duskily. "It wasn't anything, really, Mr.—Stevens." Her tongue stumbled through this lame excuse. "I don't honestly know Jack very well. I mean, I haven't known him very long—" She broke down there.

"I see." Pat gravely surveyed her deepening flush. "Live here in Tascosa, do yuh, Julie?" he asked suddenly.

Too late she saw that, in continuing to talk with this imperturbable and persistent man, she was only getting in deeper and deeper. Pat had discerned without difficulty the

extent of her real interest in Jack Ambler, and he was calmly proceeding to drag information out of her, piece by piece. Help came from an unexpected direction as Sam and Ezra hurried up, their look portentous.

"Ambler's done a sneak, Pat," Sloan exclaimed, before Stevens could head him off. "We tried t' snag him before he got away, but he give us the slip—"

Julie turned a look on him that would have flayed the hide off a thinner-skinned man. She was not long in taking in the true state of affairs. "So you tried to grab him, did you?" Her stinging words sarcastic, she whirled on Pat. "Is this the extent of your 'friendly interest' in Jack? If it is, I'm quite sure he wants none of it!"

Whirling on her heel, she strode rapidly away, back stiff and her head up. Sam's jaw dropped as he watched her go. "Ain't that the chick that pulled Curly Head's hair? What's bitin' her now?" His tone was exaggeratedly innocent.

Pat shook his head reprovingly. "Yuh did it that time, Sam," he murmured. "Just as I was persuadin' her to talk—"

"Wal—" Sloan turned crusty. "Mebby *'twas* a mistake, bustin' up that way. But it's Ambler we want, Pat. An' it looks like he's gone again!"

"It certainly must have occurred to you that the girl would lead us to him again," Pat pointed out plainly.

"Hell, I never got that far along," exclaimed Sam, still inclined to be faintly indignant. He swung around, pointing across the street. "She went in that store yonder. We can watch when she comes out, if you're that set on it—"

"Tut, tut, Sam." Pat smiled pityingly. "Must be off your feed a bit, today. Recommend watchin' the back door of that store," he went on matter-of-factly, "an' I'll say yes!"

Ezra and Sam exchanged significant glances, frankly registering contempt for his tolerant manner. "Smarty pants!" Sloan muttered, almost, but not quite, inaudibly. Ezra was more practical, if scarcely less brusque.

"Let's be gittin' around there an' keep an eye peeled, then," he growled shortly.

He headed for an alley leading between the buildings across the street, and Pat and Sam followed, unhurried as long as they remained in the street, but increasing their pace as soon as they had slipped from view. They came out a moment later at a point from which they could watch the rear of the store into which the girl had stepped, across the littered backyards which intervened.

"What's yore big interest in this gal?" Sam queried as they waited, peering.

"She's Ambler's girl, from the looks," Pat returned. "Started to tell me he rides with her dad, and then suddenly she shut up. My guess is we weren't intended to know that, whoever her dad might be. . . . Yuh know," he continued, "from the first minute I laid eyes on her, she reminded me of somebody or other. I'm still wondering if I'm right—"

Sam stared at him. "By thunder!" he ejaculated hollowly. "You're right! It's them same cheekbones, an' the arched nose and all. . . . But hell, Pat! She *can't* be Rip McGill's daughter—a nice girl like her? It don't make sense!"

"Don't seem to, does it?" Stevens was turning over his own thoughts. "But I've run into a setup like that, once or twice in the past. . . . If it's true," he went on levelly, "then McGill's headquarters must be right here in Tascosa. Maybe his family is located here—"

"Psst!" Ezra was peering around a pole behind which he had taken cover. "There she comes," he muttered hoarsely.

Having their look, Sam and Pat saw Julie emerge quickly from the rear of the store, as Pat had predicted, and begin to pick her way through the stacks of empty crates and parked freight wagons and buckboards. One glimpse of the manner in which she darted hasty looks about her was enough to confirm her stealthy flight.

Another moment, so quickly did she move, and she would have disappeared from sight altogether. Scrambling quietly

after her, the three men watched as she reached the outer fringe of buildings and struck into a dim path leading through the mesquite thickets bordering Tascosa Creek on this side of town.

"Headin' for home, like as not," Ezra murmured. "Find that, an' we may be closin' in on McGill an' Dyer an' the whole crowd."

Sam glanced at Pat, his bushy brows hoisted. Stevens's nod was expressive.

"Maybe this is it, Sam," slid from his thin lips. "Grease your elbow, an' don't wait to see what they'll do first."

Sloan's snort was a token of his intentions should they run into their quarry thus unexpectedly.

Once having reached the path, the girl had faded from view almost at once; for this kind of going inevitably slowed up her followers, lest they should stumble into a guard before they knew what was happening. But nothing halted their progress as they worked through the brush, from bend to bend of the faint trail. A moment later, a dirt roof and the top of an adobe wall loomed up over the mesquite tops.

Pausing to scan the layout, Pat motioned silently to either side. Taking the hint, Ezra and Sam faded into the brush, working around to circle the adobe from both sides. When they had had time to reach their positions, Pat moved up circumspectly, hand hovering near his gun and his glance alert.

He saw nothing to arouse his suspicions. The adobe shack slumbered peacefully in the beating sun. The clucking of a few hens along a shady wall lent a homely sound. No horses appeared to be in evidence—the tumble-down corral behind the place was empty. Pat did not allow himself to be misled by appearances, however. Watching the shadowy doorway, he stole quietly closer.

"Hello, the house!" he called out suddenly, in resonant tones. "If you're there, McGill, come out! The place is surrounded!"

Silence ensued for the space of several seconds. Pat was

asking himself if the horse thief was inside, crouched there, screwing his courage up to come out shooting; or whether ambush awaited his own wary entrance. Least of all did he anticipate the appearance of a gaunt, severe-visaged, elderly woman, who suddenly appeared in the door, arms akimbo, an apron bound about her scrawny waist.

Nothing could have been more homelike—or more of a letdown. Yet there was an eagle shrewdness in the sharp gaze which met Pat's own level eyes; nor did the woman show any notable meekness of spirit in her opening blast.

"The place is surrounded, is it?" she threw out, with mock severity. "It was surrounded long before you ever saw it, young man—with meanness, an' poverty, an' brush! . . . What is it you want here? There's little 'nough for anyone to want, God knows! But I'm askin' anyway."

"Reckon you're Mrs. McGill, ma'am?" Pat was strictly respectful. "It's Rip I'm after—him and some of his friends."

"You'll have t' look elsewhere, then," she retorted brusquely. "He ain't here—"

"Sure of that, are yuh?" He continued to watch her closely, alert for any signal to someone inside whom he could not see. "Then Ambler'll do in a pinch. All I want right now is a word with him. Tell him that."

He was talking for the benefit of any chance listener who might be lurking inside. But Matty McGill's disillusioned glance only sharpened with hostility.

"If you want Ambler, go hunt him up—or whoever yuh do want, once you've made up yore mind," she snapped. "None of 'em's here, worse luck!"

"Maybe you'll allow me to satisfy myself of that fact," Pat said dryly, motioning Ezra and Sam in from their positions in the brush as he spoke.

Matty McGill's thin jaw sagged slightly, and then snapped shut with a click. "What nerve!" she exclaimed agitatedly. But she stepped aside as Sam Sloan gingerly edged past her and thrust his head through the doorway. After a pause, he

pushed inside, to be gone for several minutes. Outside, they heard an angry exclamation in Julie's voice, coming from within; and on the heels of it, Sam re-emerged in hasty confusion, with an abashed expression on his normally impudent countenance.

"Ain't nobody there but the gurl," he announced. "Reckon I interrupted her in somethin' or other—"

Ezra began to laugh gruffly, and a thin smile flitted across Pat's lean face. It was gone as quickly. "Sorry, ma'am," he told Mrs. McGill. "It happens that was necessary. . . . Is Rip away from home for a spell, occasionally?"

"Yes, he is," Matty flung back defiantly. "Or by gravy, you fellers wouldn't be nosin' around here so free!" She breathed noisily through her nose for a moment. "Yuh don't have t' tell me why you're here! What's Rip been up to now?" she blazed, her face settling in rigid, homely lines.

"Well, there may be room for argument about it," Pat evaded smoothly, well enough pleased with what he had already drawn out of her. "Anyway, I'd like to catch up with him long enough to talk it over. . . . Been here in the last day or so, hasn't he?" he whipped out unexpectedly.

"No, he hain't!" she retorted tartly, not to be caught that way. "Just what *do* yuh know about him, mister? Tell me, an' I'll have somethin' to say to him myself!"

"Ez," Pat told the lanky tracker curtly, "take a look at the tracks in that corral, before we go any further."

Ezra moved down there, and took his time in looking around. His homely face was sober when he came back. "Been a dozen broncs in that pen durin' the last couple days or so—an' there's roan hairs stickin' to the bars o' that gate." His one eye glinted. "It *may* mean nothin'. Yuh kin have yore guess—"

Nodding his head, Pat glanced at Mrs. McGill without speech. Biting her lips with vexation, she was unable to brazen the situation out.

"Well, s'pose he has been here, then!" she exclaimed desperately. "It's his home, ain't it?"

"Rip seems to operate over quite an area," returned Pat dryly. "I'm not sure whether I'd say he's got a home or not—"

Tears of poorly suppressed rage stood in her eyes. "Mister, I swear I've done all I could with that man!" she said vehemently. "It's got so I'm afraid to learn what he's been up to next, an' that's the truth. I know what you're here for well enough! Don't expect no lovin' kindness from me; but if yuh can do somethin' to straighten Rip out, an' I'm able to believe it, you'll get my prayers, so help me!"

This was plainer than anything else she had said yet, and Pat was able to comprehend the situation far better than she may have thought possible. But he did not let up on her. There were things it was imperative that he should know.

"I see," he assented woodenly. "Afraid I can't promise any bargains, ma'am, but I'll certainly do what I can. You'll be able to further matters considerably by tellin' us which way Rip and his friends went—"

Matty opened her lips to speak, and the three friends awaited her reply with attention. But at that moment Julie suddenly appeared in the door, a look of determination on her youthful face, as if unable to keep out of the talk any longer.

"Don't tell him a thing, Ma!" she exclaimed, with cold indignation. "He's just wormin' all he can out of you. He's already tried it with me. What concerns Jack or Dad is none of his business!"

"Maybe you'd like to say what harm is done, if I should know." Pat smiled disarmingly.

Even Mrs. McGill awaited the response to this query, but the girl refused to unbend in the slightest. "How do yuh know they ain't plannin' to shoot Pa down in cold blood?" she demanded bluntly, addressing her mother with vehement scorn. "*We* don't know what their business is! If they want Pa, let 'em find him themselves. Then it's up to Pa!"

Her resolute insistence carried weight with her mother.

Mrs. McGill shrugged helplessly. "I declare, a body don't know what to do," she averred plaintively. Then her ingrained firmness of character reasserted itself. "Sorry, mister," she told Pat simply. "I reckon my daughter comes first with me. I can't tell you no more, an' there's an end of it."

Nor would she speak again beyond a muttered word or two, despite Pat's persuasions. A tart antagonism had awakened in Julie as well, and he could get no satisfaction from her either. Convinced that he was wasting his time here, he finally turned away, motioning to Ezra and Sam. They walked up the path toward town.

"Rip McGill's women're harder'n he is," muttered Ezra, once they were beyond hearing. "Not much use waitin' for Ambler t' show up now. I don't reckon—"

"I've been turnin' it over," Pat responded thoughtfully. "At first I thought we stood a chance. But knowing we're in Tascosa and on the lookout for him, I've come to the conclusion Ambler won't waste any time puttin' distance between us. At least *I* would, in his shoes."

Sloan nodded grumpy confirmation of this argument. "The thing now is for us to git on down the trail fast. Ain't much chance of overhaulin' Ambler, let alone McGill an' Dyer, but we kin always hope!"

Ready a few minutes later, they swung up and set off down the street, with a last look at the busy hamlet they were leaving, and soon were threading the tall mesquite thickets which covered the flats at Tascosa's edges. Half an hour later the broad undulating plain spread before them, enigmatic and vast.

"Yuh know—" Ezra voiced his thoughts at length. "Young Ambler ain't got too much of a start on us, at that—"

Pat shot him an approving look. "Right you are, Ez," he agreed cheerfully. "And if I'm at all right, it's simply a matter of usin' our heads, whether we grab him or not."

"Wal, c'mon then," growled the lanky one. "Knee that bronc into lookin' alive!"

He set the example by prodding his mount into a mended pace; and though Pat winked at Sam, unseen by their long-legged companion, he followed suit without demur. They covered a dozen miles at a rapid pace and, reaching an elevation, were still unable to spot a moving object anywhere on the range outspread before them. Ezra was all for pushing on with increasing speed, but here Pat called a halt.

"Hold on, Ez," he said tolerantly. "Hasn't it occurred to yuh yet that Ambler may just possibly be behind us?"

Ezra rolled this over deliberately. "Could be," he admitted gruffly. "But if you're wrong, we'll sure lose 'im."

"We could lose him either way—if we're wrong," Pat pointed out simply. "We'll stake out here and wait."

They ground-anchored their broncs in a wash and sat on the ground to watch. All around them the horizon stretched, empty and silent. It seemed almost incredible that man had ever frequented such a desolate spot for any purpose whatever. As time dragged by, Ezra became by degrees more firmly convinced that they were making a mistake.

"We're gittin' nowheres fast, at this rate," he groused at last, unable to bottle up his impatience longer.

"Think so, do yuh?" His tone insultingly triumphant, Sam was gazing attentively back over the way they had come. "Take a squint yonder, my fine-feathered friend!"

Rising to his knees, Ezra took one look and froze. "Some hombre comin'—" he murmured tensely. "Fast, too!"

"Sure." Sloan was loftily tolerant. "It's Ambler, takin' out t' join up with McGill's crowd, tight as he kin go!"

Ez whirled to Pat, his face bleak. "We lettin' him lead us t' them fellers?" he rasped.

Pat shook a prompt rejection. "Un-uh. No more chances on that young buck, Ez. Get to your horses, an' we'll spread out an' grab him right here and now!"

They slid hastily down into the wash, swung into the saddle and spread out to fling their net across the path of the oncoming rider, keeping to cover till it was too late for him

to elude them, however he chose to maneuver. In the concealing shelter of a cut-bank, Pat waited till the faint clatter of racing hoofs strengthened and drew close. At last he forced his horse into the open, throwing up a warning hand at the horseman who came thundering forward.

"Haul up, Ambler!" he commanded sharply. "We're takin' yuh in charge!"

9.

Ambler's six-gun blazed as he swerved wildly aside, the slug fluttering past Pat's cheek. His horse was game, striving to turn on a dime as the puncher flung all his weight on one rein. Harsh yells from Ezra and Sam confused the bronc, however. It stumbled, and sought to recover itself just as Ambler fired again, his shot flying wild. Next instant, horse and man fell in a heap, Ambler flinging himself clear at the last instant, and rolling over and over.

Pat roweled his mount close. Unhesitatingly he dived out of the saddle and landed on Ambler in a flying tackle. Jack never knew what it was all about; he struggled violently for a moment, before Pat's superior strength told. When his gun bounded from his grasp to tumble in the dust, Ambler relaxed. Pat got up at once.

"That's better," he growled tersely, retrieving Jack's gun. "Get hold of yourself, now, an' maybe we can talk—"

Ambler looked at him dazedly. "Stevens, ain't it?" he got out, with an effort. "I don't understand—"

"What don't yuh understand?" Pat queried shortly.

"Yuh could've downed me easy, while I was throwin' lead so wild." The words seemed forced out of him. "You've little enough reason to love me, Stevens, as you see it. Still yuh

went out of yore way to nab me without so much as pullin' trigger—"

"Maybe I felt like doin' it that way," Pat retorted colorlessly.

"That's no answer!" Sitting up, Jack faced him squarely. "Yuh still think I'm one of those rustlers! Don't deny it!"

Pat's grin was unabashed. "Sure of that, are yuh? . . . Wonder who it was tipped off the law to go out to Batwing where we were being held prisoners, while there was still time? It couldn't have been McGill—"

Ambler's show of confusion was marked. "Did somebody do that?" He strove to cover up promptly, yet his delay dispelled any doubt Pat might have held that his guess had been a good one.

Pat's nod was firm. "Somebody did, Ambler. It was my first inkling," he continued levelly, "that—somebody—was capable of worryin' about anybody besides Julie, shall we say?"

Jack flushed violently. "Why drag her name into it?" he demanded, almost sullenly.

"I'll be frank, Ambler. I think it's solely on her account that we found yuh where we did—and doin' what yuh were doin' at the time!"

"Yuh mean—in Rip McGill's camp?" Ambler rasped hoarsely, unable to hold the query back.

"That's it, exactly." Pat's tone was confident now, still making its demands on the other.

Ambler started fiercely, and then froze, his lean face hardening. "I was afraid to face it, Stevens," he groaned. "I still hate t' believe it. But it don't mean what yuh think it does!"

"I'm perfectly satisfied I know what it means," said Pat bluntly. "Your mistake, Ambler, is tryin' to conceal who it is you've been strivin' to shield. Why don't yuh admit you followed Julie to that outlaw camp in the first place—and it was her you were tipping off when yuh fired those warning shots?"

Ambler displayed growing excitement. "Yuh mean," he

choked, "yuh don't hold it against Julie because she—" He stopped. He could not go on.

The three men exchanged glances, smiling tolerantly. "So yuh had it figured we'd dislike Julie for stickin' with her daddy, Ambler?" Pat shook his head quietly. "Reckon yuh don't know us anywhere near as well as yuh thought."

Jack appeared dazed. "But old Rip—" he began.

"A bad apple—that one." Pat nodded. "Nobody'll give yuh an argument there. Right now we're wondering if you and Mrs. McGill are strictly out of the same basket."

"I swear we ain't, Stevens," Ambler burst out. "Matty McGill's struggled half her life to keep that old reprobate straightened out. He's gone worse lately. She's got her suspicions, all right, but so far she's refused to give in—"

"And Julie's loyalty don't even question the right or wrong of it," Pat added soberly.

Ambler hesitated. "She knows the difference, Stevens. But she seems to feel dead sure he can be saved." His face knotted with renewed struggle over some tough problem of his own. "I ain't been able to persuade her that a good scare may not succeed in joltin' McGill back onto the straight and narrow."

"But, meanwhile, you've been breakin' your neck to help her anyway," Pat contributed evenly.

"What else can I do, Stevens?" exclaimed Jack harshly.

"Maybe I can help yuh there. It hasn't taken me long to make up my mind about Julie McGill. Too many persons around her are doin' their best to ruin the girl, Ambler. She may have made mistakes—she may even make more—but she's a fine girl, and don't forget it! Your play is to stop Rip from using his influence with her. And the way to do that is to help us grab him and his friends, so we can put 'em away."

Jack plainly dreaded such a course, but he found no means of refuting Pat's hard-headed arguments.

"If there's a chance I can do it, and keep pretty much

out of the picture, I'll just have to persuade her afterward that it was all for the best," he said finally.

"Yuh mean you're with us?" Sam broke in gruffly. "Wal, that's sense, Ambler. Goin' the way yuh were, you'd only get in deeper without helpin' the girl a bit. We'll see yuh through," he encouraged.

Pat could have asked for no better outcome. He was inclined to believe in Ambler's honesty; and it did not take him long to conclude that he could have asked for no better ally in pursuing the outlaws. Ambler might yet copper Cal Dyer's aces.

They turned south and struck into the Outlaw Trail once more, riding slow but steadily. The character of the country continued to alter as they proceeded, growing steadily more wild and arid. The ragged line of the Cap Rock extended before them, unbroken and endless, marching along on their right. Sam and Ezra eyed the shadowy canyons gashing that bleak wall at intervals. In times not very long gone, the Kiowas, the Tonkawahs, and the Karankawahs had made life miserable for the Texas settlers, striking repeatedly from the safe haven of these hideaway canyons; and even now the nefarious activities of furtive outlaw bands made this part of the Panhandle unpopular with ranchers. Only an occasional hardy soul like Cass Bonnard mustered the courage to settle near the district. Long, empty miles fraught with unguessed dangers separated the settlers.

"Reckon there's still plenty o' panthers prowlin' in amongst them crags," Sam observed, scanning the wild scene.

"Yeh. Two-legged ones, yuh mean," Ezra corroborated tersely.

Sam laughed. "Wal, with an old curly wolf like you along, not to mention a young wildcat t' boot, I ain't exactly worryin'."

Working steadily southward, they were getting into warmer country. The sun blazed down out of a copper sky, and

lizards darted from their path. "Sure could do with some shade," grumbled Ezra, breaking the afternoon quiet.

The others remained too indifferent to respond to any such idle comment as this. But an hour later, Sloan pointed out the spot where some kind of branch left the faint trail they were following, to run toward an imposing gap breaching the high mesa wall.

"Somethin' or other in there," he hazarded. "Mebby a shack where the owlhoots lay over—or it could be a Mexican ranch or somethin'. Should we pass it up?"

Pat was asking himself the same question. He settled the matter by turning his mount that way. "Easy enough to be sure, instead of sorry," he murmured. The others followed.

The break in the rocky wall loomed high and wide over their heads as they rode through, the canyon floor cluttered with ancient gnarled mesquite trees.

"Blind box canyon," Ezra announced, nodding to the fore. "Looks like some water in here, though. A spring, mebby."

Rounding a bend, they saw unexpectedly a sizable adobe structure, comfortably disposed on a bench against the seamed canyon wall. A battered, slug-punctured tobacco sign beside the door apprised them of the nature of the establishment.

"Danged if it ain't a store," Ezra exclaimed gruffly. He had grown wary in a flash and was darting sharp glances about. A mercantile establishment in any such wild, remote country as this could serve only one purpose—supplying the needs of men who dared not show themselves in the towns. "Real, old-fashioned deadfall, like as not. We shovin' in there?"

Pat's curiosity had been aroused by the drowsy look of the place. "I wouldn't miss it." He grinned. "Who knows what we'll run into—"

"Yuh mean information—or excitement?" retorted Sam, with an edge of scorn to his voice. But Pat's good humor, suddenly restored, did not abate.

"Does it matter?"

In silence they rode up the narrow trail to the bench and paused before the store. The place, they now saw, was divided into two parts, one of which had the unmistakable look of a bar. A single sleepy horse stood at the hitch rail outside. At a nod from Pat, they swung down and stepped inside.

It was not easy to see in this shady interior, after the hours of glare, but they made out a rough bar across the sanded floor and moved toward it. A bald, ivory-skinned sphinx with deep-lined cheeks and heavy, inscrutable eyes stared at them speechlessly. Sam looked him over with rash interest.

"Same to you, old boy." He nodded satirically. "We'll have a shot o' ginger beer, or anythin' else yuh got handy—"

There had been no one else here besides this graven image behind the bar when they entered. But at that moment a staccato rattle of hoofs sounded outside, and Pat returned swiftly to the door. The horse they had seen dozing at the rack was gone, its rider already nearly gone from sight down the narrow bench trail. Pat moved back to the bar.

"Price of bein' a stranger in a strange land," he murmured. "Nobody trusts us." He sighed.

The silent man behind the bar served them drinks and took their money. Pat conned the dubious chances of persuading him to anything like loose talk.

"Wouldn't figure a store would pay, 'way off here in the brush," he began artlessly.

"Think what yuh want," came the rustling response, after a deliberate delay, insulting in its tone of indifference and rejection.

Sam chuckled. "Don't tell 'im that," he protested. "He's dang nigh unmanageable now—"

It did not win even a grudging smile. About to say something further, Pat paused to turn his ear once more toward the door. Hoofs scraped out there, softly this time, and there came a muffled squealing of saddles hastily abandoned. A moment later the outside door darkened, and half a dozen

wooden-faced men strolled inside, glancing over Pat and his friends with seeming casualness as they gathered at the other end of the bar.

"Oh, oh." Ezra lowered his voice. "Some o' Dyer's cronies, closin' the trail for him—ain't it, Ambler?"

Jack shrugged uncertainly. He, too, feared as much. But there was no break in Pat's stony serenity.

After a cursory survey of the newcomers, Sam and Ez returned ostentatiously to their bantering, confining their remarks this time to each other. But all four were set at hair-trigger, well knowing this to be an outlaw hangout into which they had stumbled. From the signs, the only law in force here was carried on the hip.

A broad-shouldered six-footer among the strangers, manifestly their leader, kept glancing down the bar as if puzzled. Blunt-minded, and elementary of instinct as he was, he finally pushed up beside Stevens and tapped him briefly on the shoulder.

"Mind sayin' who yuh are, friend?" he inquired calmly when Pat turned without haste to glance into his eyes.

"Not at all," was the lazy answer, delivered in a drawl and accompanied by a level regard which did not waver. "Any good reason why I should?"

"Wal—" The tall man glanced toward his friends. "There's five of 'em. And mebby we can rely on Talky in a pinch." He nodded significantly toward the scowling bartender. "I know he's right curious."

"Don't talk so much, Nevers," the latter growled, with short patience.

Pat knew this casual use of names was by no means accidental. He had never heard of Nevers before; doubtless the outlaw was well and unfavorably known here in Texas. Without hesitation he grasped the proffered opening, his manner thawing.

"Well! So you're Nevers," he exclaimed, as if finding the knowledge welcome enough. "It's a small world, ain't it? . . .

Never expected to get this far down the Trail," he proceeded easily. "But I'll be sure to tell Butch I ran into yuh."

The offhand reference to Butch Cassidy, the notorious long rider with whom Pat and his friends had tangled before, was not lost on the watchful outlaws. Nor did the inference escape Nevers that Pat and his companions were frequenters of the Outlaw Trail.

The silence in the place was now profound. Nevers' friends, hard-cases one and all, were listening with strained attention, and even Talky, the taciturn proprietor, kept his hands well below the bar. Nevers himself had grown stern, continuing to rake the four with bleak eyes.

"What yuh doin' here?" he rasped.

Pat pretended surprise. "If you're so anxious to know, Nevers, I'm tryin' to overhaul Dyer," he flung back with curt brevity.

He had not made a mistake in using that name. Nevers' slate-colored pupils batted briefly. "So yuh know Cal, too," he got out unwillingly.

"Know him? I should smile!" Pat glanced right and left at his friends. "Wouldn't yuh say so, boys?"

Ezra had the wit to respond. "He'll know me better, anyhow, next time we meet," he said angrily.

It was walking on thin ice to venture this kind of talk here, but Pat's hunch continued to pay off. Nevers' hardness relaxed slightly, his curiosity uppermost.

"So? What's yore quarrel with Dyer?" he queried softly.

"Little matter of horseflesh," Pat said shortly. "I long ago learned that broncs are movable property, Nevers. But when yuh latch onto a likely bunch of 'em, yuh don't look for a double-cross from those yuh consider yore friends."

Nevers could not wipe off the grin which stole across his rocky jaws as he began to comprehend. "So Cal an'—his friends put a fast one over on yuh," he returned gruffly, frowning as he ended.

Pat's nod was firm. "A fool might've said it was Rip Mc-

Gill's work," he went on baldly. "I know better. Dyer will too, after we catch up!"

Nevers' manner showed growing respect. "I've heard somethin' of the kind about Dyer in the past," he allowed. "It don't do to pass over such tricks, that's a fact." His tone grew quizzical. "What'll yuh do now?"

Pat shrugged. "We'll take those roans away from him, that's for certain." His voice held the unyielding rasp of iron. "After that, I don't know. Depends on just how bold an' bad Cal reckons he is."

Every word now was carrying him and his friends onto safer ground. Nevers appeared to accept them at face value, while at the same time their claims rang true to his cynical knowledge of the wild bunch. Dyer and Rip McGill would not be the first to break the outlaw code; yet these listening men registered the same dour disapproval which this fall from grace always evoked.

"I had a word with Dyer, when he come through here," Nevers announced coolly.

"That so?" Pat waited. "Maybe it wasn't worth repeatin'—"

"I dunno." Nevers was carefully vague. "I seemed to gather they was plannin' a job of some sort down below—either at Fort Davis, or Marfa. Dunno what it could be. Yuh might run acrost his boys before yuh get that far," he continued craftily. "Say in the sand hills west of Wild Rose Pass."

Pat nodded sagely. It was as near to a tip as he would be likely to get from these close-mouthed men. "Could be," he assented carelessly. "Have a drink with us, Nevers—"

The big outlaw accepted a glass and downed its contents at a gulp. "Good luck, boys." He turned away.

"Same t' you, Nevers." Sam could be bland when he chose. "If yuh should find a choice roan in yore corral sometime, think nothin' of it."

Pat was grinning to himself as they moved out of the place a few moments later and sought their mounts. His own smooth tongue had brought them out of a tight cor-

ner unscathed, for they could now ride out of this place without further hindrance from the hard-bitten outlaws foregathered here. But it was like Sloan to gild the lily with his glib suggestions, sounding only too much like half-promises, but which in reality were no promise at all.

"You and your choice roan," he muttered scathingly to Sam as they swung up.

Sam chuckled. "He kin think what he wants," he retorted innocently. "*I'd* sure be some surprised t' find a strange bronc in my corral any time at all. Reckon he will be, too—if it ever happens!"

10.

Two days later the great ragged wall of the Cap Rock swung away from the quartet as they rode, running off into the west. They were leaving the Staked Plain behind. The wild Texas border lay before them, purged now of its ruthless red hordes, but still a lawless and little-explored wilderness.

Rugged and hilly, scarred and burnt by centuries of storm and sun, this land was a bewildering maze of cactus, mesquite and huisache. Only the faint winding trace of the Outlaw Trail led them on, too flinty underfoot to reveal with certainty the marks of recent travel.

Unremitting persistence brought them to the Horsehead Crossing of the Pecos late in the day, and here they were granted their long-sought reward.

"Four or five broncs went by here, a day or two back," Ezra announced, scanning the sandy clay about the crossing.

"Headin' south." Pat nodded, having his own look. "It's them, all right. No two ways about it—"

Sam sat his saddle on the riverbank, gazing across to

the desolate hills beyond, painted now in the melancholy pastels of sunset. "It's Dyer's crowd," he confirmed slowly. "Can't be nobody else, goin' that way. They ain't losin' no time headin' straight for the Big Bend."

The section he named was the wildest and most remote corner of all Texas, a huge and mountainous area lying within the bight of a great curve of the Rio Grande. For years it had enjoyed a notorious reputation as the worst, most perilous sanctuary of every wanted outlaw and renegade in the Southwest, to say nothing of the bloodthirsty Mexican revolutionary rabble under General Juan Cortina, which made that rock-ribbed and forbidding country their favorite stamping ground.

The thought that they might be forced to follow their quarry into such an area was more than enough to give pause to even the lightest of heart among their number.

"Nevers mentioned a stopover in the Sand Hills," Pat said quietly. "Ever in that country, Ez?"

"Reckon I'll know a bunch o' sand hills when I come to 'em," the lanky one parried gruffly.

Pat winked at Sloan. "There's a bare chance we all will," he responded lightly. "I was hoping we could ride in from an unexpected quarter. Might be a good idea."

"I've heard Dyer speak of Sand Hills Station," Ambler said finally. "From his talk, it's across the Glass Mountains from Fort Davis. Does that help?"

All three of the others nodded, glancing their approval at him. "Yuh got good ears, Ambler," Ezra told him. "Sam an' me've been t' Fort Davis. I got a hazy remembrance o' them Glass Mountains, too. Gives us somethin' t' go on."

Wading the oily Pecos, low at this season, they camped on the farther bank. Toward dawn a creaky rumble on the marvelously still air dragged them all out of a sound sleep. Sitting up in their blankets, they watched a string of half a dozen Mexican carretas grind across the ford, followed by a freight rig. The big-hatted, dark-faced freighters glanced

their way without pretense of recognition, themselves presumably wary of an attack. In a short time the falsetto cries and whipcracks of the caravan died out up the trail.

Pat rolled out, sizing up the fresh, invigorating morning. At this hour it was always cool and keen. Before the others had fairly stamped on their boots, Pat had a fire going, and breakfast was not long in preparing. It vanished even more quickly. By the time the sun rose red over the eastern horizon, presaging another hot day, they were in the saddle.

Midmorning found them sweeping the tumbled low mountains to the fore with keen gaze. Ezra pointed out the rugged Apache range, stretching its serrated barrier across the west. "Reckon this is the Glass Mountains, off east here," he continued. "We'll drift over thataway."

Later a marked gap appeared in the ragged hills, which could only be Wild Rose Pass. Reined up on a rocky ridge, Sloan pointed off to the left, where leprous pale patches showed on the tangled slopes below the pass.

"Them's the Sand Hills," he said positively.

Pat's nod was one of agreement. "There's our target, boys," he seconded. "It may prove to be lost motion, but we'll comb those hills good before we shove on."

The Outlaw Trail led by a circuitous route in the general direction they were taking. But several miles from their objective, Pat swung out of the trail, striking toward the lower hills on a course of his own choosing.

"If Dyer's crowd should be layin' over at Sand Hills Station, they'll be sure to cover their back trail," he observed. "In that case, we'll just make certain they don't spot any strange riders joggin' their way and get suspicious. It's possible to see a long ways in this country—without using glasses, either."

Indeed, by a single sweep of their eyes in almost any given direction, they could scan an outflung scope of country it would have taken days to ride over. Nowhere was there any visible sign of life. And yet as they worked closer to the sand

hills, by slow degrees Ambler's tense manner grew steadily more distraught.

"What'll yuh do if yuh ride into that gang, Stevens?" he demanded at length.

"Grab our hosses, an' give Dyer and old Rip a spankin' lesson, o' course," Sloan flung in carelessly. "What yuh expect?"

"There'll be gunplay, I reckon?" Ambler persisted.

"Like as not." Pat's glance was probing. "Does the idea make yuh nervous, boy?"

Jack struggled briefly, and his answer came out in a blurt. "Yuh might's well know, Stevens, that Julie rode out of Tascosa ten minutes after yoreself! I couldn't catch her! Right now, I don't know where she is, but—"

Pat's brows hoisted sharply. "You think she's gone to warn her dad, is that it? . . . Take it easy, Ambler. We don't shoot women. An' she may not even be with that crowd at all."

Ambler's harassed expression revealed how thin a hope he considered this to be. "She's got to be with her father! She can't be anywhere else," he argued strongly. "I'd never forgive myself if anything should happen to her—"

"Don't forget that job they're supposed to be plannin' at Fort Davis, or Marfa," Pat pointed out. "What's more reasonable than that Dyer and his roughs should lay over, here in the hills, while McGill shoved on to size up the layout? Nobody'd be very suspicious of a crusty old codger and his daughter wanderin' around town."

"Yuh think so?" The bare possibility cheered Ambler more than anything else that had been said. "By golly, yuh got a point there, Stevens. I hope you're right!"

He was so deeply in earnest that Pat glanced at him curiously. "You're none too sure of Julie's safety in that bunch, are yuh?" he guessed shrewdly. "Who is it yuh have in mind, boy?"

Jack's dull flush showed that Pat had hit the mark. He

doggedly refused to relinquish his nagging fears, even at the cost of dragging them out into the open.

"Cal Dyer's had his eye on Julie from the start," he confessed somberly. "He's known her from when she was just a kid, an' pretends to treat her as such now. But I ain't fooled a minute, the way he hangs around her, teasin' and pesterin' her every chance he gets. I only hope she's wise to him!"

"You think maybe she isn't?"

Ambler's answer came reluctantly. "I—reckon she is, Stevens. But she knows Cal's influence with her dad, too. Dyer dangles a quick, easy fortune in front of Rip, and McGill rares up like a bronc after a juicy carrot. Julie don't know how to break it up, but she keeps tryin'. I'm only afraid she'll try once too often—"

The words went far to confirm Pat's original opinion of Cal Dyer's true status. Dyer was using McGill for all he was worth in the furtherance of nefarious schemes. Now it was apparent that the renegade cherished designs on Rip's attractive daughter—perhaps not urgent as yet, but assuredly hovering on the horizon. Ambler had grounds for his secret apprehensions.

The fact only steeled Pat's cool determination to take decisive action before it should prove too late.

They drew steadily nearer the sand hills as they talked. The time came when Pat signaled for silence and an alert attention. All studied the mottled, white-and-brown pattern of the hills with narrow interest. They presented a bewildering jumble of successive swells, strewn this way and that, without discernible order or system. The area appeared forlorn and utterly deserted, a deceptive impression which only added to their sinister aspect.

"We'll have to go this blind," Pat murmured. "Ten to one their owlhoot station is buried deep in that jumble, far from its edge. I haven't spotted a lookout yet, but we won't go off

half-cocked. We'll split up, circle around, and close in through the hills. Got that?"

"Sure," chorused Ezra and Sam with gruff readiness.

"Another thing." Pat was speaking sharp and quick now. "Grab their lookout, if yuh can—but if yuh can't, knock him off. This is for keeps, after their caper on the Batwing. The shot may give the others warnin' and probably will, but at least they won't know what they're up against."

Ambler, mastering his taut nerves, paid strict heed to these terse instructions. All had drawn their saddle guns. After a few more words they split up to work in opposite directions around the outermost rim of the hills—spreading their net wide before attempting to close it about the quarry.

Indeed, the sand hills were so far-flung, leaving the four hunters widely separated, that Pat seriously doubted whether their trap would prove effective unless sprung with the utmost precision. He thrust the thought aside, working around the sandy swells or over their shoulders, meanwhile keeping a sharp watch for the inevitable outlaw lookout, posted none knew where.

The others rode with their solitary thoughts, ignorant of what the next hour might bring. Sam Sloan shoved his plodding steed along methodically, pausing only to examine briefly the hollows opening before him, or ground-tying the bronc while he scrambled puffing up some yielding sandy slope for a careful scrutiny of the surrounding crests.

Once and again he swept the desolate hills, without result. The third time he did so, he looked long and was about to turn away when a faint discordance in the dull coloring of these confusing hills several hundred yards away caught his attention. Crouched in the scrub, alert as a deer, Sam watched with slitted gaze. Finally he grunted.

"That's their lookout," he murmured. "Perched over there an' keepin' an eye on the trail. . . . Wonder if any o' the others spotted 'im yet?"

All he could be fairly sure of was that they had not them-

selves been spotted. But it mattered little. Sam's course was clear. He knew how little hope there was of getting close enough to that guard to take him prisoner. It left only one other alternative. Sam scrambled down to his horse and set off warily and without undue haste in the direction of the outpost.

The twisting and turning passages lying between these unstable hills were confusing even to a veteran. Before ten minutes had passed, Sam was no longer as sure of his direction as he could wish.

"Better grab a fresh look," he grumbled, brows knitting as he gazed uncertainly about. "Pat said t' be sure an' not let that hombre slip through our fingers—"

Presently he was panting up another slope, clinging to the scanty shelter of scattered, stunted brush, and slowing as he neared the top lest an unguarded movement give him away. Parting the brush at last, he gazed out. This was a higher crest than the others round about, affording a wider prospect. But to his disgust, he was still a considerable distance away from the outlaw guard, whom he spotted immediately. This time he saw as well the lookout's pony, tethered by its bridle rein to a brush clump near at hand.

Glancing about before he retired, Sam suddenly froze. He had caught a flash of Ezra, much nearer the lookout than Sam was himself, and closing in fast and purposefully. Ez was behind a brush-covered dune less than fifty yards from the guard and in fact was pushing his pony harder than the precarious situation dictated.

"Whyn't he slow up?" the stocky little man breathed. "He'll sure give hisself away, rammin' around like some locoed bull—"

Even as Sam watched, the redhead drove his mount straight at the rising slope before him, as if intent on hurling it to the top without more ado. But the going underfoot proved unstable in the extreme. The plucky roan slipped, pawed at the sliding surface frantically, and lost its balance

altogether. The animal reared backward as Ezra swung hastily out of the saddle, crashed into the brush and threshed wildly in the effort to regain its feet.

The lookout heard that crash, as indeed Sam himself did at a far greater distance, and sprang to his feet to run toward the edge of the hill and look sharply about. Cursing under his breath, Sam knew his own gun would be useless at that range. He saw Ezra scramble awkwardly up and race through the brush toward the top. Carbine in hand, Ez made it. Getting a bare glimpse of the outlaw guard, only a matter of rods across the space separating them and well within range, Ezra threw the gun to his shoulder.

The lookout saw his peril. For some unexplained reason, he did not appear to carry a rifle himself. Nor did he bother to yank out the sixgun swinging at his hip, but wheeled instead to run swiftly in the direction of his horse.

Expecting momentarily to see the man stumble and go down to the crack of Ezra's carbine, Sam could not understand the delay. The outlaw reached his bronc and hurled himself into the leather—and still no shot came. Ezra had lowered his gun and was working at it frantically as if something was wrong with it. He flung it up once more, the glinting barrel leveled.

"Why don't the blazin' fool shoot?" Sam raged, beside himself with impatience and bitter disappointment. "He's lettin' him get plumb away!"

Belatedly the carbine spanged—once and again—but without visible effect. A handful of hair in his grasp, Sam groaned. He saw the outlaw gallop from his post, dropping quickly from sight and clattering away. That finished it. Not again would the same chance of capturing or downing the fellow present itself. He was fully warned now, and carrying word to his friends.

Bellowing his exasperation, Sam fired twice into the air with his Colt, and twice again, as an unmistakable warning to Pat and Ambler. Then he stumbled down to his horse,

leaped into the hull and dashed off in the direction taken by the guard.

Racing through this jungle of brush and shifting sand at breakneck speed was a quite different thing from picking one's way forward with circumspect care. Before he could do so much as pick up the outlaw's tracks, Sam was forced to slacken speed. A crackling of brush at one side, a few seconds later, whirled him around. Ezra pushed into the open, once more astride his horse, his brows contracted thunderously.

"What in hell's the matter with yuh, butterfingers?" Sam bawled at him violently. "Heave that lousy carbine overboard, an' let's go!"

They broke into a well-defined path and shoved ahead as fast as they could. Just as they reached the edge of an open hollow, a band of horsemen swirled away from the sagging pole corral beyond and darted into a fold in the hills, stringing out as they went.

Gunfire crackled as Ezra and Sam raced across the hollow. Sweeping around a brushy shoulder a moment later, they came upon Pat Stevens, standing spread-legged as he gazed ruefully down at his horse, lying sprawled out in the brush. It had been shot and was weakly kicking its last.

"Somethin' tore loose," Pat said bitingly, glancing up at his friends with hard eyes. "They jumped me before I even knew they were on the move. I couldn't save my bronc—"

Sam guessed that it had been the horse, acting as an unwilling bulwark, which had saved Stevens' life, but he made no comment. "Licked again." He nodded tersely. "Them hombres left a couple moth-eaten broomtails back there in the corral t' choose from, pullin' out so fast. . . . Not much use tryin' t' fog after 'em now, though," he added lugubriously.

"They've high-tailed," Pat assented as briefly. "The way they know these damned sand hills, we don't stand a chance." He looked up as Ambler came hurrying his pony forward.

Caught at a greater distance, the latter had been unable to come up in time. Relief flickered in his eyes at sight of them all still intact.

"They got away! Did—any of 'em get hit?" he queried, with an effort.

"Reckon not, Ambler." Ezra was gruff.

"Any of yuh see Julie, then?" Jack pressed on, searching their faces.

"Un-uh," supplied Sam, innocently enough, and Pat shook a silent negative. Only the big, one-eyed redhead turned away, refusing to answer. Ambler dropped his reins, sprang after Ezra and grasped him roughly by the arm.

"Speak up, Ez! Yuh saw somethin'," he charged vehemently. "Why don't yuh tell us what it was?"

11.

That Ezra had no thought of giving a direct answer to the question was plain from his dogged expression. Sam Sloan peered at him intently as Ambler voiced his accusation. The pudgy, bristle-jawed little man appeared to suspect something. He was not long in making up his mind.

"Ez," he queried easily, "is there somethin' wrong with yore saddle gun?"

Ezra glanced down at the weapon, still slanting in his grasp, with something like confusion. "Naw," he returned grumpily, not at all desirous of pursuing the subject.

Pat was watching them both with close attention. "Why do yuh ask, Sam?" he put in quickly.

With a look of sly triumph, Sloan told how he had witnessed the big redhead's advance on the lookout, and the incredible manner in which he had botched the whole opera-

tion. "When yuh did finally shoot, it wasn't t' hit," Sam told his tall partner flatly. "A baby could've done every bit as well. It's yore fault them birds got away from us this time. Wasn't no accident, neither," he concluded darkly.

Ezra fired up with a great show of indignation, his one eye smoldering. "It's all a dang lie! What kinda talk is this?" he roared angrily.

Pat paid scant attention to his gusty vehemence. "Who was it yuh saw, Ez—that you were so careful not to shoot down?" he demanded briefly.

Still struggling with himself, Ezra would have stamped away in a huff. But Pat's next words halted him.

"Was it Julie, Ez?" Stevens asked softly.

It was a moment before the big man could bring himself to answer. And then he only nodded. Studying him steadily, Pat understood. There was more at stake here than Jack Ambler's anguished feeling of apprehension for the girl. Ezra felt obscurely ashamed at his own softness, but some iron streak in his character made him refuse to back down.

"I sure wish it'd been you, an' be damned to yuh!" he bawled at Sam, furiously. "If you're so anxious to have 'er knocked off, do it yoreself!"

A long pause ensued, during which the whiteness of Ambler's strained face was marked.

"Ezra did right, of course." Pat broke the silence at last. "Lord only knows what pressure was brought to bear on Julie to make her stand watch for those hombres—"

"It's Dyer's doin' again, Stevens!" Ambler exclaimed hoarsely. "I can read his earmark a mile off. He's tryin' to drag her down to his own level—doin' all he can to destroy her self-respect!"

Pat's nod was slow. "Yuh may be right, boy. From here it looks like it can't be anythin' else. . . . At least," he proceeded coolly, "Dyer's rotten game has settled one thing in our minds. We know beyond any question where the girl is."

"An' she might almost as well be dead."

"I wouldn't say that, Jack," Pat responded mildly. "You're all upset about this. There's still a good chance—an' from right here that chance should get better. We know where Julie's heading."

"Straight into the sheriff's custody. . . . If not an army guardhouse!"

"Anyway, after what'll come next, she can't be under any more illusions about her dad," Pat pointed out patiently. "When the break comes, I predict she'll be more than ready for yuh to snatch her away from those blacklegs. Don't you see that, Ambler?"

But the young fellow was too restless to be brought to see reason. "What now, Stevens?" he demanded. "We standin' here all day, or shovin' on?"

Pat overlooked his offensive tone, aware of the heavy burden under which many an older man might crack. Turning, he led the way back to the open hollow.

Sand Hills Station was not a particularly impressive establishment. The stone-and-timber dugout, a squalid shelter at best, and a lopsided pole corral or two were all it amounted to. Worn-out articles of clothing, a discarded saddle, and the blackened remains of old fires lay strewn about. The two ratty-looking cayuses abandoned in the near corral were probably a lot tougher and more wiry than they looked.

Stevens uncoiled his rope and snaked one of them out of the pen, allowing the other to escape to the hills in the process, and proceeded to throw his saddle aboard.

"Watch yore step, now," Ezra advised jocosely as he prepared to mount. "That jughead's prob'ly a thoroughgoin' renegade, too—"

The bucking and pitching displayed by the uncurried bronc when Pat swung astride his back bade fair to carry out the analogy. Expert horseman that he was, Pat soon straightened the kinks out of him.

"This'll do," he grunted in brief approval.

They wasted no time in striking out of the hills, nor did

they seek again the hidden turnings of the Outlaw Trail. Ezra set an undeviating course in the direction of Fort Davis, across the mountains. There proved to be more than one chain of heights to cross before they got there. It was hard going, West Texas never having been designed for ease of travel. Late afternoon found them bucketing down the barren lava slopes, with Fort Davis lying baked and brown below. It was a fagged and trailworn foursome that jogged out on the bleak parade ground an hour before sunset.

The last military outpost on the wild Texas borderland, Davis was not a large place. It had seen busy times, and even now a Negro detachment was maintained here which had seen rugged patrol service for a hundred miles and more along the unpredictable Rio Bravo.

The fort lay on a broad flat, loosely hemmed in by a curving, weathered rimrock. Along the edges of the parade, lines of wooden barracks, supply depots, and officers' cottages extended. On the south side tall cottonwoods stood in graceful rows along an acequia ditch, and beyond could be descried the scattered adobe and frame buildings of the civilian settlement, just off the post limits.

"Reckon it's down there we'll have t' look," Sloan murmured, gazing about.

At first glance, Fort Davis did not appear at all a likely setting for outlaw activities, with its strict policing and general air of frugality. But there was a supply store, and a saloon or two, which gathered up loose cash in considerable amounts following the paymaster's visits.

After being questioned cursorily by a sentry as they left the parade, the four rode down into the village. It required no great attention to size this place up. So short was the dust-churned street that it could be swept from end to end with a single glance.

A lumbering freight team, a few soldiers on leave, and the usual mixture of army hangers-on were all they found to attract their curiosity. Indolent Mexicans moved here and

there in the shade of the buildings. No examination of the few hitch racks revealed a glimpse of the sleek Bar ES roans they sought.

Pat hauled up before the general store, which looked much like a prairie trading post. "Might snap up some news in here," he remarked.

They dismounted and trooped inside. It was a large and dusky interior, jammed with merchandise of every description. Soft-spoken soldiers were eating canned fruit at the grocery counter. A rancher carried out heavy bundles and bags. Clerks bustled about. Pat moved up to the counter.

Selecting a few items of food and a box of shells, he sought to engage the elderly, suspendered clerk in conversation. "Many strangers drift through?" he inquired easily.

The bored clerk shrugged. "Some."

"We're on the watch for some acquaintances of ours. They might have come this way." Pat described Dyer and Rip McGill briefly, and paused for the reply.

The clerk was not interested. "Ask the Major there—" He gestured toward a tall figure of military bearing who had stood by all this while, unobtrusively following the talk.

This man stepped forward crisply as Pat turned toward him with polite interest. His worn uniform was smart, his straw-colored mustache bristling with formality. But the outstanding feature of his severe face was his keen, appraising eyes.

"What are you men after at Fort Davis?" he demanded curtly. "You're not horse dealers, I believe. Would it be cattle for the commissary?"

Calmly Pat disclaimed any such connection. "We're ridin' through, Major. Makin' inquiries about some fellows we hope to locate. Perhaps you . . ."

He got no further. "No, sir," the officer interrupted, coldly and finally. "I've no information for you whatever. May I advise you to ride on, quietly and without delay?"

Pat's hoisted brows showed his astonishment. There was no

friendliness here, no desire or even willingness to help—but only flat rejection. Nor did Pat's efforts to induce the Major to unbend avail in the slightest.

"This is a warning, mister, in case you didn't understand me," came the clipped, unyielding accents. "Ride on."

Pat's shrug was unconcerned.

Outside, the four exchanged glances while fastening their few purchases on their saddles. The Major was still watching alertly from the door.

"So much for our looks," Pat muttered as they mounted and jogged away. "It's plain the military maintains a mighty strict watch here."

There was no censure in his tone. Sam nodded, reading his thought. "Reckon it's sense, too. . . . Wouldn't yuh say that answers the question of whether McGill an' Dyer will try any o' their shenanigans in this place?"

"You've hit it," Pat assented. "No point in lookin' further here." His brows knit in thought. "That Major may've taken us for owlhoots, or he may not. He's takin' no chances—an' the same would go for Dyer's gang, supposin' they showed up. We'll shove on to Marfa."

They camped that night a mile or two from the post, and went on in the gray of the morning. The town of Marfa lay a half-day's ride to the south. Before midday its buildings rose above the dun plain, and an hour later they were jogging in at the head of the wide main street.

Ezra and Sam looked the place over, remarking about its characteristics with their usual bluntness. "They sure could do with some shade here," drawled Ez, squinting in the unbroken glare of sunlight.

Marfa had a mixed population, with many Mexicans in evidence. The number of cowboys and buckboards in the street indicated that numerous ranches lay scattered about the lava-capped hills.

"We scoutin' for our Bar ES hosses?" queried Sam.

Pat shook a negative. "Take it easy, Sam. We'll stick the

broncs in a stable first and sashay around. If any of McGill's crowd are here—which I doubt—I want to see 'em first."

They did as he suggested, afterward seeking a restaurant where they enjoyed a good meal and then splitting up as they looked the town over. Foregathering later in a bar, none had any startling news to report. No sign of Rip McGill, or Dyer, or any other member of the outlaw gang had been seen. Pat was not discouraged.

"It's a good sign, rather than otherwise," he hazarded. "If they're aimin' to pull a job here, they won't circulate around too promiscuous beforehand."

"Reckon the bank's their target," Sam said. "Some of 'em should show up there sooner or later. Yuh look it over?"

"We'll do that now," Pat said.

They had their look at the Marfa bank, a two-story frame structure adjacent to the Rim Rock Hotel. It was the alley, opening between the two buildings and leading to a livery stable in the rear, which gave Pat his idea.

"Nothin' to stop us from takin' a room in the hotel," he murmured, "and watchin' for McGill or any of the gang to show up. They'll be sure to case the bank before they make their play. We may even get some kind of a line on their plans."

It was a shrewd enough suggestion to put promptly into effect. As far as they knew, not a soul had thus far paid them the slightest heed in this town. But on Pat's advice, they stayed close to their rooms overlooking the bank. During the remainder of the afternoon, at least one of them, and sometimes two, was on watch every minute of the time.

"What yuh starin' at?" Sloan demanded, noting Ezra's strange actions at the window, as the shadows were growing long.

"Watchin' that phony-lookin' Mex down there," growled Ez, pointing the man out. "Reminds me o' the spig Bonnard said was ridin' with Dyer, somehow—"

"You're seein' things," Sam scoffed. "Who ever heard of tellin' Mexicans apart?"

At any rate, the Mexican soon slouched on out of sight, and did not reappear. Ezra shrugged. Nothing further occurred to arouse their curiosity. Supper over, the four retired to their rooms to discuss their own plans in broader detail.

"They got a marshal here—I seen 'im today," offered Sam. "Yuh callin' in the law?"

Pat opened his lips to reply, when a brisk knock came at the door. They looked silently at each other. It could be the hotel clerk.

"Come in," Pat called.

The door swung back, and a softly smiling man stood in the opening. He stepped in, shut the door, and leaned back against it indolently. There was something pantherish in his lithe frame.

"Reckon we've not met before," he murmured. "The name's Hall—Doc Hall."

Sam Sloan half-rose from the bed on which he was sitting, then sank back again. He said nothing. Ezra was equally wordless. It was Pat who broke into a jarring, but genuine chuckle of appreciation.

"Howdy, Hall." He nodded. "Sam was just askin' if I'd call in the law. I didn't exactly expect it to be the ranger service."

Hall's smile was gentle. There was no badge on his clothes, nor anything else about him, unless it was the self-confident tilt of his hat, to identify him as a Texas Ranger. But his words dispelled any lingering doubt.

"After yuh rode in from Fort Davis today, and bothered to get a room overlookin' the bank, I thought it'd be just as well if we had a little talk," he let drop in his soft voice. "How are things on the Big Trail, boys?"

Ezra started, his gaunt features reddening. "Yuh know we come down the Outlaw Trail?" he barked. "Ain't been talkin' to the birds, have yuh?"

Hall's shrewd smile did not change. "Jailbirds, yuh mean?" he parried.

Pat's lean face was a mask of thought. He shook his head slowly. "You've got us wrong, Hall," he told the ranger. "Not that I blame yuh any. Maybe yuh got wind of Cal Dyer's game somehow. Anyhow, we're not a part of his gang, casin' the bank for a stick-up—as you suppose."

Hall, finding this frankness unusual, hoisted his brows politely. "Seems to me I've heard different—" He paused, his glance straying to Ambler.

"If you've heard I've been ridin' with Dyer's crowd—tryin' to pry Rip McGill's daughter loose from 'em, and nothin' else, Hall—you heard the truth," Ambler blurted out heatedly.

"Well, well." The cool ranger's grin was broadening now. "Who was it said folks in this country won't talk?"

Pat caught the faintly satirical note in his voice. "Maybe it's a lucky thing yuh stumbled over us, Hall," he said evenly. "We can use some help in grabbin' Dyer and his cronies, down here in strange country. Want me to tell the whole story—or aren't yuh interested?"

Doc Hall's noncommittal nod conceded nothing. He listened, however, as Pat outlined events from the time of McGill and Dyer's arrival unheralded at the Bar ES. Pat spared nothing of their strange adventures on the trail, nor did he omit an explanation of Jack Ambler's anomalous position.

"You can wire the sheriff at Powder Valley, or Cass Bonnard in the Panhandle," he wound up. "Either will confirm our identity. Then we can get down to business."

"I'll do that." Hall nodded, evincing little doubt now of what he would learn. "Meanwhile, Stevens, if we're to nail down Dyer's crowd, it seems to me you're overlookin' a good bet—"

Pat followed his meaningful glance, and caught on. "You mean Ambler? Give us the rest of it, Hall."

"He's got an in with McGill," Hall said reasonably. "Why

not capitalize on it?" He looked at Jack again. "Would you consider rejoinin' the gang, Ambler, and keepin' us posted?"

"It might work. But what if they watch me too close?" the younger man muttered reluctantly.

Hall shrugged. "It's a chance we run . . . Don't forget, this is in that girl's interest, too."

Ambler thrust out his jaw. "Will yuh promise to go easy on Julie, Hall, if the rest are caught?" he demanded hoarsely.

Hall's nod was deliberate. "It's a deal—unorthodox, but I'll see that it sticks," he said without hesitation.

"What about the marshal here?" Pat asked.

The ranger shrugged. "Leave him out. Bagley and me ain't exactly friends." He did not elaborate, his smile bleak.

Ambler gulped. "Okay. I hate to do it, but I'll join Dyer's gang if I can find 'em, and learn what I can for yuh. But, Hall, if yuh forget yore promise about the girl, I'll never let up!"

12.

"Take the lower trail after yuh come to the forks, Ambler," Doc Hall instructed, reining his horse down. "Wander off through the scrub brush like yuh was lost. Yuh won't have to travel far."

Jack looked at the quiet-eyed ranger uncertainly. "You're sure I won't have trouble findin' 'em, Hall?" His tone was uneasy. "I don't want to lose any time over this."

They were five miles from Marfa, in the midst of a desolate stretch which, from its air of utter forlornness, appeared to have lain empty since time began. It was nearly dark, only a few faint streaks of light lingering low in the west as a remembrance of the departed sun. Overhead, and to the east,

stars were beginning to shine, high and brilliant, without casting any light on this shadowy range.

Ambler had screwed up his courage to rejoin the outlaw gang, and the cool ranger was advising, out of his own knowledge, how it could best be done. Already the young fellow was beginning to regret his bargain.

"Them birds are liable t' shoot first, and think it over later," he muttered, gazing into the gloom.

"Do as I said," Hall insisted calmly. "You'll be all right till yuh run into 'em. After that, you're on yore own."

Ambler squared his shoulders, girding himself for the ordeal. They parted after a few more words, and he pushed on into this shadowy world over which night was steadily thickening. He was in no haste. The trail showed only a pale thread, winding on through the brush. His bronc picked a way over the loose stones, slowing to take an occasional downward slant or cross a crumbling wash.

A mile beyond, Ambler came to the fork in the trail. Shapeless rock monuments and shattered ledges rose all about him here, reducing what slight visibility there was. Taking the trail Hall had named, Jack gazed about him uneasily. He had no idea where he was going. How could he possibly find anyone in this pitch darkness?

Almost an hour later, the faint red flicker of a distant fire caught his eye. It snuffed out immediately; but working in that direction, he finally made out what could only be the dim reflection of a campfire against the dark brush.

"Hall was right," he muttered. "They're hidin' out here in the scrub, if it ain't somebody else—" He broke off, refusing to consider the possible result should he run into some entirely strange outfit.

Later, forging steadily on, he raised his voice in a hail. It would not do to create the impression that this was a surprise visit, regardless of who it proved to be.

"Hello, the camp!"

The call evoked no response whatever. Dead silence

blanketed the brush, and, pausing to wait and listen, Ambler asked himself if any human life could exist within miles of the spot. Afterward, the flickering gleam appeared again, reassuring him. He was drawing closer.

"Anybody around?" Ambler sang out, shoving ahead sturdily. He no longer looked for a reply; it was enough that he unmistakably announce his own arrival.

Reaching the fire, he glanced about in bewilderment. This gap in the brush had been used as a camp—there could be no mistaking that. That it had been hastily abandoned only moments before was equally plain, for there was no one about now, nor did any blanket rolls or other items of camp gear lie about.

Then why had this bed of coals not been stamped out while there was time? Many thoughts flashed through Ambler's brain as he sat staring down at it. What if Dyer's crowd had dusted out for good, without even waiting to learn who he was—dragging Julie with them? Or had they gone at all? A chill congealed his spine at the idea that even now a gun might be trained on him in the darkness.

He was backing his pony hastily away from the faint circle of light when a harsh voice smote his straining ears, coming from startlingly close at hand.

"Stay there where yuh are! Don't move," the voice ordered with hard authority.

Ambler could not prevent himself from whirling in the saddle. "That you, Dyer?" he whipped out thinly.

A shadow glided near and a hand fastened on his checkrein. "Get down, Ambler."

Jack recognized Puff Harris, a middle-aged, homely man in castoff clothes, incredibly phlegmatic of manner, who rode with the gang.

"Howdy, Puff," he greeted with apparent relief. "My gosh—thought I'd never find yuh. Where is everybody?"

Harris, ignoring his question, gave a low whistle which must have been a signal and watched him dourly. After a

moment, the brush thrashed faintly, the sound drawing nearer. Cal Dyer appeared in the light, his round catlike face alert as an animal's. Rip McGill slouched forward behind him. He glowered at Ambler silently, brooding eyes suspicious.

"You, huh?" Dyer cast mesquite twigs on the fire. Slowly it came to life, blazing up redly. "How'd yuh find us?"

Making every pretense of welcoming this meeting, Ambler expostulated strongly. "What do yuh mean, how? I dang near didn't!" He peered into their faces blankly. "Lost my way an hour ago—and finally I spotted the fire. All I dared to expect was company for the night. I never dreamed it'd be you, or I might've been a lot more cautious—"

"Sure." Rip nodded sententiously, intolerant of Ambler's feeble joke. "An' got shot for yore pains!"

The fourth member of the gang, Haze Kildean, a gangling, red-bristled individual of forty-odd, advanced to gaze steadily at Ambler with reckless eyes in which red flecks gleamed. None of these men were glad to see him. But Ambler's pulse leaped at the knowledge that this furtive gathering, in such a place, only confirmed the worst suspicions of Pat and the ranger.

"What yuh want, Ambler?" Dyer always spoke curtly and to the point, never wasting words.

"Me? I don't want a thing," retorted Jack coolly. "I'd a whole heap rather be somewheres else. But Mrs. McGill's plumb worried about Julie. She's here, ain't she?"

"Any other reason for showin' up jest at this time?" Dyer persisted, colorlessly.

"Well, I've been huntin' for several days, if that's what yuh mean. Ever since Julie disappeared, there in Tascosa. . . . Reckon she told yuh how she untied me, an' we slipped away together, there on the Batwing—" He did not accuse them of callously abandoning him themselves, but it was in his voice.

"What did yuh tell Stevens an' them others about us, Ambler?" The query cracked like a bullet.

"Nothin'!" averred Jack stoutly. "They grabbed me, an' took after you. Yuh know that. Julie found me before they had a chance to put the screws on." He showed impatience. "Hell, Dyer—what yuh worryin' about? Would I have the gall t' come here now if I'd given anything away?"

A pause fell. Inwardly tense, Ambler waited for the reply. He had to gamble that these men knew nothing of his association with Pat Stevens. Their own dread of the man, and their haste to put distance behind them, was his best protection.

"Yuh run into Stevens anywhere on the trail?" McGill said arrogantly.

Ambler glanced at him with thin scorn. "You can judge whether I'm anxious t' run into him or not," he threw back briefly.

It carried weight. Dyer turned to the fire, gazing into the flames thoughtfully. "McGill's girl is with us, Ambler, if that's any comfort to yuh," he said at last. "Yuh ain't takin' her back this time—"

"Who said I aim to?" Jack bristled.

The outlaw brushed this aside with cynical indifference. "Listen to me." He was watching the other now with hawklike vigilance. "We're goin' to be busy for a few days. An' we need her help. Now you're here, too, yuh ain't leavin'. But if yuh plan to stay near her, you'll have to work, too—"

Ambler did not miss the bleak ultimatum concealed in the words. He pretended an increase of interest. "Plannin' a job, eh?" he returned boldly. "What's it to be, Dyer?"

Cal's colorless brows twitched briefly. He rubbed a roughened palm on the side of his holster. "Damn yore brass, kid—" he exclaimed harshly.

"What the hell! Have I gotta go it blind? . . . I'm in, o' course," Jack continued hastily. "That's if yuh want me. I reckoned yuh did, from yore talk. Any harm in bein' curious what it is I gotta do?"

Dyer cogitated, his unconquerable, wolfish suspicion upper-

most. "Reckon we could use yuh, at that," he allowed without enthusiasm. "It's the bank in Marfa, boy. Yuh ready to watch the street—an' use a gun, if it's necessary?"

Ambler read Dyer's object without difficulty. Such a job as this cold-blooded renegade proposed was likely to wind up in smoke. The men in the street would bear the brunt of any counterattack by determined Texan citizens. Dyer was willing that Ambler should cast away his life to cover their retreat, once the bank had been stripped.

His nod was jaunty. "I'll do anything yuh say—if my cut's big enough," he declared. "When's this comin' off?"

The outlaw's eyes glazed. "No matter," he growled. "We'll let yuh know. An' just remember, we ain't none of us slappin' yuh on the back, Ambler, till you've proved yore nerve."

Jack passed over the cold warning lightly. "Julie ridin' with us?" he inquired innocently.

"She is. Somebody's got t' hold the horses, an' she won't be noticed—till too late, anyway." Dyer appeared done with the subject, once satisfied of the full compliance of this new recruit. He had few illusions concerning Ambler's intentions toward the girl, but he chose to ignore them, doubtless feeling competent to dispose of any such obstacles to his own plans when the time arrived. He turned to the others.

"We'll roll in," he growled shortly. "An' tomorrow we move camp. If Ambler could stumble onto us here, others might do the same."

"Julie with the broncs now?" Jack asked casually.

Her father's nod was curt. "She camps there."

Puff Harris led Ambler's bronc away in the dark, and the latter dared say no more now. He soon learned that the surveillance over him was to be a rigid one. Haze Kildean bedded down where Ambler's slightest move during the night would awaken him, and in the morning Jack was advised gruffly to stay at the fire.

Ambler saw Julie for the first time at breakfast. Clad in levis and woolen shirt, the girl consciously avoided his plead-

ing eyes, and she was short with Dyer when the outlaw leader hovered around her with rough gallantry. Jack would have given much for a talk with Julie, but there would be no chance under the stern eye of old Rip, who chose to be harshly authoritative toward his daughter. Her warm charm was, in fact, a disturbing element among all these men. Dyer recognized it, with a grin, by ordering her to move the horses immediately after eating.

The routine of the camp was simple. Harris and Kildean were dispatched to strategic points, armed with carbines, where they acted as guards. Dyer departed shortly to ride off in the direction of Marfa.

"Is he casin' that bank alone?" Ambler asked Rip. The pair had been instructed to move the camp a mile back into the rocks during the leader's absence. "Yuh'd think he wouldn't want t' be seen—"

"Leave that t' Cal," McGill said sourly. "Grab the coffeepot there, an' we'll be goin'."

They were working their way toward the new campsite, taking their time, when the brush crackled and parted and Julie burst into sight. She looked wildly at Ambler and her father.

"One of the horses spooked and run off," she exclaimed. "A wildcat or somethin'. . . . I can't catch him now!"

"We'll help yuh," Ambler sang out. "Which way did he go?"

The girl pointed. They raked their mounts into motion, and, loudly condemning Julie's carelessness, McGill rammed off into the brush. He was soon gone from sight. Reining the other way through jumbled rocks, Ambler joined the girl, who drew rein at his appearance.

"Good for you," he said in warm approval. "I was wonderin' how I'd ever manage a talk with yuh—"

"Jack, why did yuh come?" She cut across his good cheer, earnestly. "These men will shoot yuh down at the first move!"

Ambler sobered. "What are they doin' to you?" he countered directly.

She made an impatient gesture. "That doesn't matter! It's Dad I'm thinkin' of—And now you've only added yourself to my troubles!"

"I can tell yuh this much," he shot back. "I'm here to break this business up, Julie. I've been ridin' with Stevens and his friends—and I want yuh to break away and join 'em. They're in Marfa. You'll be safe there."

She paid no attention to his overriding tone. "Jack, you've ruined everything!" she exclaimed tragically. "Dad'll be caught—thrown in jail—perhaps shot!"

"No, no. That can be arranged with—with the ranger." He had grown gruff. "Rip can be saved yet, Julie."

She gasped, paling. "The rangers? Jack, how could yuh do that to me?" Her brown eyes were desperate. "I'll tell Dyer! I can't let Father ride into that trap—"

He grasped her by the arms, shaking her gently. "Yuh can't! Tell Dyer," he ground out, "and it means my finish. They'll kill me!"

She blanched. "What—will yuh do now?" she managed, in a strained voice.

"I'll ride out to tell Stevens their plans," he said resolutely. "When does this stick-up come off, do yuh know? If I disappear, they may give the plan up—"

"You'll never get away. They won't let yuh out of their sight!"

As if to bear out her prediction, Rip McGill appeared at that moment, driving the strayed horse. His beady eyes pierced Ambler.

"Same old game, eh? This'll stop, Ambler, when I tell Cal." His dry tone was menacing. "Git back to yore job," he snapped waspishly at Julie.

Ambler looked at the girl. How much more lay between them to be said! He had not even learned the time set for the holdup. But Julie knew better than to protest that harsh

parental tone. As she turned off into the brush after her charges, her shrug was resigned.

Rip did not let Ambler out of his sight again that day. But for the girl, Jack would have bowled the old blowhard over without ceremony and fled. Together they set up the new camp, and later Puff Harris came in for a meal. He drew McGill aside for an earnest, low-voiced colloquy, none of which the young fellow caught.

Cal Dyer's manner was curt when he showed up shortly after dark. "We ride in the morning," he announced. "Allow two hours to reach town, an' we'll get there by ten o'clock."

"Tomorrow, eh?" Puff Harris's lazy eyes were slitted. "Might's well git it over—"

Their talk was long as plans were ironed out and perfected. Julie was called in to attend the talk. She volunteered little, and did not look at Ambler at all.

Jack's sleep was fitful during the long hours of the night. Gone was his slim hope of warning Stevens and Hall in time. But probably they would read the signs accurately. So intent was Ambler on his own vague plans for dragging Julie out of this robbery, by force if necessary, that he moved through their scanty breakfast like an automaton and saddled up and began the fateful ride as if in a dream.

The two hours which carried them at a sedate jog to the edge of Marfa passed with incredible swiftness. Ambler looked dazedly at the busy townspeople moving about. Was he soon to be shooting at these men, regardless of firm resolve, to preserve his own life—or worse, that of Dyer or Rip McGill?

In a harsh voice, kept carefully down, Cal Dyer superintended preparations for the raid. They were few. Julie was left with the horses at a trough on a side street. In silence the five men strode toward the bank.

"Stay here on the corner," Dyer told Ambler. "If lead flies, *keep the street clear*. We won't be long."

Jack nodded, swallowing hard. Still in a daze, he watched the others advance to the front of the bank. Kildean went on alone, brazen and assured, to take up his post beyond.

Rip McGill's natural air of bold authority stood him in good stead as he stepped into the bank, with Dyer and Puff Harris on his heels. Ambler could scarcely understand the indifference with which other men glanced at them in passing. Fighting the hard lump in his chest, he wanted to run, to grab Julie and flee—anything but stand here and await the inevitable. But Rip McGill's presence held the girl rooted here in town, and he had no choice. . . .

What was happening now at the bank? Glancing up and down the street nervously, Ambler was utterly unable to fathom the absence of Pat Stevens and his friends. Had something happened to delay or mislead them? Should they fail to appear, the situation was hopeless. From the first, Ambler had counted on Stevens as his one hope of being extricated from what must otherwise prove a wholly disastrous dilemma. It looked very much as though he must relinquish that one slim thread of hope.

13.

Pat Stevens swung out of his saddle in a cloud of dust before the Rim Rock Hotel and, whipping the reins round a post, strode directly into the bar. Doc Hall was there alone. Pat did not look at him, passing behind the ranger and fronting up to the bar a couple of feet away.

The bartender poured Pat's drink and moved off before Hall as much as glanced in his direction. Pat spoke under his breath without turning his head.

"They're ridin' into town now," he murmured. "I waited

long enough to make sure it was them. They'll be here in ten minutes."

"All of 'em?" slipped from Hall's immobile lips.

"Six anyway," Pat breathed. "Ambler's with 'em. I expect this is it, Hall."

Doc nodded curtly and pushed away from the bar. Pat was close behind him as he made for the door. He tossed a significant look at Ezra and Sam, seated indolently at a nearby table. The partners rose and sauntered out also.

The four paused in the street, slanting keen looks this way and that. Doc Hall had never seemed more casual. "Let's get set," he muttered.

They watched him stride across the street, in accordance with prearranged plan, to enter the door of McEwen's Hardware, directly across from the bank, where he would take up his post. Pat nodded to the partners. "All right, Ez. You can cover the street from the window of our room."

Ezra stepped into the hotel and made for the stairs. Sam departed at the same unhurried pace, passing the bank and disappearing into Jake's Tobacco Shop, on the same side of the street. Nodding to himself, Pat moved into the hotel lobby and sank into a chair from which, through the big window, he had an unobstructed view of the street each way.

Waiting there, he opened a week-old Dallas paper, holding it up to shield his face; but his glance remained glued to the gap between his hat brim and the edge of the paper. Time slipped by, and the town went on about its humdrum morning chores. He asked himself what the outlaws' program was to be. Unfortunately, Ambler had failed to get word back. Would they ride boldly in, haul up before the bank, and strike with that crashing swiftness which often proved effective?

Keyed up in spite of himself at the prospect of action, Pat received a jar as Rip McGill, Dyer, and two other men, readily recognizable from Ambler's descriptions, abruptly sauntered past the hotel. They had, then, left their horses

elsewhere. Eyes slitted, Stevens raked them through the glass with a measuring scrutiny. Any doubt of their identity—for he had never actually seen these men before—faded when they paused before the bank, one of their number passing indolently on, while the remaining trio stepped coolly and purposefully in at the door.

Pat understood the function of that fourth man, loitering on up the street beyond the bank. He had been set to guard the getaway. There ought to be another one, though, a rod or two this side of the bank. Turning to glance that way, Pat experienced a slight shock as his eyes fell on Ambler, standing there on the corner. Dyer had dragged him into the business with a vengeance.

Even at this distance Ambler's wrought-up condition was manifest. Arrested, Pat studied him a moment before noting the direction of the young fellow's gaze. Ambler was watching something or someone with tranced attention. Pat saw a tumbledown ranch buckboard ambling up the street, behind a bone rack of a horse. The dark-faced lout who was driving appeared to be a Mexican peon, a common enough sight in this border town; but leaping thought began to race through Pat's agile mind as he continued to watch the fellow.

The attention Ambler appeared to pay this humble rig was marked. Surprise and dismay were in it. Could the wagon form a cog in the complicated plot even now ready to unfold? Pat recalled the Mexican member of Dyer's gang described days ago by Max Christian. Outlaws often went to fantastic means for smuggling their rifles—otherwise so difficult to conceal—through town to the scene of a robbery. Quite possibly the tumbled tarp in the back of this wagon box might conceal a deadly arsenal designed for the use of McGill, Dyer and their gang.

Much depended on whether the harmless-looking rig pulled up before the bank, as if casually. Pat's muscles stiffened while it drew nearer. Then he sighed his relief as the ramshackle wagon creaked on past the front of the bank and,

after turning into the alley, disappeared on its way to the livery barn behind the hotel.

Pat's alert glance whipped back to Ambler. Dyer, McGill, and the other man had been in the bank long enough for things to be happening in there. Perhaps Doc Hall could see something from across the street.

The heavy seconds dragged like lead now.

Ambler was wiping the sweat from his brow when the muted crash of a gun ripped the morning quiet. It came, as near as Pat could judge, from the interior of the bank. Then glass shattered with a nerve-tingling jingle as a rifle spanged. A window in McEwen's Hardware dissolved to fragments as Hall fired directly across into the bank.

The sleepy street of Marfa sprang to alert attention in a twinkling. Harsh voices rang out, and a cowboy raced down the street with diminishing clatter. Whipping his Colt from the scabbard, Jack Ambler fired twice into the air and sprang behind a gallery pillar at the hotel corner. Obviously he was not going to assume any major part in the action to come.

The Dallas paper went sailing aside as Pat reached his feet and sprang for the door. He paused there, gun in hand, while he scanned the open. Strange that Dyer and his crew had not yet come running out of the bank!

The red-bearded outlaw guard was the only man of them visible in the street. He had a six-gun in either hand, the barrels of which he chopped down in steady strokes as he let fly at every movement which caught his attention, his spaced shots pounding the hot air with a sinister regularity.

Ezra's carbine slapped once, and again, from upstairs. The red-bearded owlhoot staggered, caught himself, and went on firing as he backed into the cover of a doorway. Sam's heavy Colt .45 joined in from another door or two below.

Almost five minutes passed, stretching out like an hour, while the town gathered its wrath; and still no bandits ran hurriedly out of the bank. Pat could not fathom this strategy,

unless Hall was keeping them pinned in there. He stepped out onto the gallery and motioned Ambler sternly away.

"Get out of this fast, boy," he growled.

A slug, slamming into the post at Pat's elbow, whirled him around then. Puff Harris burst out of the bank door, brandishing his gun, his legs working like pistons. Doc Hall was standing in McEwen's door, his rifle leveled. At its crash, Harris went down as if rammed. He was up again almost as quickly. He had guts. A wild slug from his gun fluttered through Pat's shirtsleeve, and the ranger ducked at the same time.

Upstreet, Sam was having his troubles with Haze Kildean. A rapid exchange of shots rattled up there. Pat saw Sloan hurtle into sight and plunge determinedly at the outlaw. He hauled Kildean roughly into the open, hurled him tumbling into the street, and angrily kicked the outlaw's gun from his grasp. Kildean plunged after it, to come up shooting. Sam hammered him into the dust with a single deliberate shot, and the owlhoot writhed briefly and lay still.

All this happened with incredible rapidity, within a space of seconds. Hall and Puff Harris were still bitterly dueling it out, the thud of their guns reverberating against the buildings. Pat held his fire till Dyer and Rip McGill, choosing their moment, came pelting out of the bank at last, shooting as they came.

A saddled paint pony and two duns stood hitched at the sagging rail before the bank, tossing nervous heads as the lead sang all about. That obstruction had hampered Doc Hall from the start. He had had to fire under their bellies and across their uneasy backs in his efforts to get at Harris, but the black-headed outlaw was down finally, gasping out his last.

Dyer and McGill scarcely bothered to glance down at Harris as they ran past. A heavy fire was concentrated on the front of the bank now, which even a charmed life could

scarcely expect to survive for long. The two outlaws sprang for the tethered horses without the loss of a moment.

McGill had a leg over the paint horse when it went down, drilled by a ball from Hall's rifle. Pat dropped the near dun while Dyer was still fighting to reach its head.

"Give yoreselves up!" A lusty roar reached the harried pair. "We'll blast yore daylights!"

Pat wasted no time in determining who was the owner of that stern voice, though he suspected the town marshal. Nor did McGill or Dyer heed the summons to surrender. Except for a scratch or two, neither had been hit as yet. Abandoning the horses, they wheeled and scuttled into the alley separating the hotel and the bank. Ezra's rifle thudded from above as the scrape of their boots died out.

Pat sprang into the street. "After 'em, Sam!" he cried as Sloan came puffing up. "They're cuttin' through the livery yard to the side street!"

Shoulder to shoulder, they hastened to the corner. Catching a glimpse of the outlaws, already ahead of them, they broke into a run. A shot from Pat's six-gun sent Dyer's hat sailing, and Sam's puffed up dust beyond the pair.

"Hold it—right there!" a bull voice roared suddenly. "I'm grabbin' you two, or knowin' why!"

Sloan broke stride, staring open-mouthed at the burly individual, wearing a star on his flopping vest, who had burst out from the corner of a barn to confront them, his gun trained on them at point-blank range.

Halting abruptly, Pat raked him with a look of savage contempt. But it was Sam who voiced his exasperation, almost in a yell.

"Yuh crazy lunkhead—there goes the owlhoots!" He pointed after Dyer and McGill, now several hundred feet in advance. "What're yuh holdin' us up for? We're tryin' t' grab 'em!"

Ace Bagley, marshal of Marfa, was a headstrong, opinionated man. He did not so much as take his eyes off them

as shooting broke out afresh in the direction indicated by Sam.

"We spotted yore waitin' horses," Bagley rasped. "Reckon they'll be grabbed, too—an' we'll have yuh all!"

They scarcely heard him, gazing transfixed toward the firing. Ambler had hurried back to rejoin Julie, waiting with the horses. He was there when McGill and Dyer came running up. Pat saw him helping her hold the spooked broncs as lead began to whistle about.

A bronc went down. It was Dyer's—or had been, after being stolen from Sam and Ezra's ranch. All those horses down there were readily recognizable as the Bar ES roans. Swiftly Dyer mounted another just as McGill swung astride his own. Ambler was urging the girl into the saddle; he all but lifted her sturdy small form as Rip reached across and hauled her up from the other side.

The outlaws started away, Julie in their wake. Ambler was striving belatedly to get foot into the stirrup when he abruptly sagged and went down limply. Seeing that, Julie screamed. She would have turned back, but McGill jerked at her reins, hauling her away. In a moment the clattering horses faded from sight beyond an intervening shed.

"Ambler's down!" ejaculated Sam, unguardedly. "I'm goin' up there—"

"Know him, do yuh? One move," Bagley bellowed, "an' it'll be yore last!"

It jerked them back to reality in a flash. Pat yanked his chin up sharply. "Dammit, Bagley—you've let them get clear away!"

"Yeh?" The marshal sneered. "They wasn't carryin' no bags o' loot with 'em anyway. I didn't do so bad, grabbin' their leader, though—"

He was glowering significantly at Pat and hauling a pair of manacles from his back pocket when Ezra came striding hurriedly up. He was still carrying his rifle.

"What's the idea o' them irons?" he hurled at the lawman scornfully. "Yuh aimin' t' handcuff the corpses?"

Bagley turned back to Pat and Sam, unimpressed. "They'll soon be stiffs, if they try anything funny!" he grated.

Ez glared. Choler rose to his prominent cheekbones in a red tide. "Yuh mean these fellers? Don't yuh dare lay a hand on 'em! Why, yuh danged, stupid dumbhead . . ."

"Easy with that talk," Bagley flared. "I'm figurin' on takin' you in for questionin', too. You're all strangers—mighty tough-lookin' ones, too—an' mighty free with yore guns."

Ezra's homely face knotted with resolution. "Sure we are! Back up, yuh lame-brained galoot, b'fore I break yore head with this gunstock!" He swung the gun up menacingly.

"Here, here," a fresh voice put in. "Easy does it, Ez. . . . Wait till we hash this over. Then if yuh can't see no way out, yuh can go to work on Bagley." Doc Hall grinned at them engagingly, his cool glance touching the marshal. "What seems to be the trouble, Bagley? We stretched out two of that gang in the street. Yuh provoked because yuh didn't get into the play? I see the big bugs slipped through yore fingers."

"Not so's yuh'd hardly notice it," retorted Bagley, impervious to this stinging sarcasm. He indicated Sam and Pat. "I managed t' grab these two, coverin' for the others. Reckon they thought I wouldn't catch on—"

A frown flitted over Hall's bronze features. "Not at all," he countered stolidly. "These boys were workin' with me from the start. Does that answer yore doubts?"

Ace Bagley's disbelief was patent. "Wal, it's no great surprise t' learn they're cute enough to git around you—"

Hall's tone only grew milder as his patience wore thin. "Drop the nonsense, Bagley," he advised the marshal curtly. "Why, Sloan, here, finished off that ginger-whiskered owlhoot out in the street, at considerable risk to his own neck. He's got a dozen witnesses."

Townsmen, running forward from every quarter to gather and listen to this colloquy, were quick to corroborate the ranger's story.

"Sloan's on the level, Bagley—if that's his name," a man assured him. "These other fellers, too. We seen it all."

A hard man to convince, Marshal Bagley did not back down without an argument. "This hombre Stevens took yuh all in," he said darkly. "If I'm wrong, where's the money from the bank? I already pointed out that them fellers that got away wasn't packin' it—but it's gone all the same! Ask Hafner, at the bank, if I ain't right!"

The bank president, arriving at the moment, nodded portentous agreement. "The vault was cleaned, boys. Somewhere in the neighborhood of sixteen or seventeen thousand. I won't know for sure till we've completed our audit."

Silence fell over the group in the street as this gloomy intelligence sank home. Indeed, it posed a knotty problem. Pat racked his brains to account for the mystery of where the money had gone, without success till a sudden thought flickered in his mind. Recalling how long the bandits had remained in the bank, he found the fact sufficiently significant now. Somewhere behind that apparently purposeless circumstance lay a solution.

He was about to accost Hafner, of the bank, when a shout was raised down at the trough where Julie McGill had held the horses. Men came forward, half-dragging and half-pushing young Ambler. Face stained with drying blood from a graze, he was groggy but able to navigate.

"Here's one of yore owlhoots, Bagley," a captor vociferated. "A rake acrost the scalp knocked him out—but he kin talk now. Ask *him* where the money is!"

Bagley whirled triumphantly, only to feel the ranger's hand on his arm arrestingly. "Hold on, Ace," Hall interposed. "Strange as it sounds, that boy's one of my men, too. I got him to join the gang an' tip us off to their plans."

Bagley gave an incredulous snort. "Seems yuh know everythin' but where that money went!"

"Hafner," Stevens managed to put in. "Is there a back door in that bank building, and does it open?"

"Yes," the banker answered, wonderingly.

Only the arrogant marshal was indifferent to where this might lead. "What yuh wanta know for?" Bagley asked carelessly.

"Take us back to that livery yard," retorted Pat. "This is only a hunch, but it might pay off heavy—"

They tramped that way. Behind the hotel Pat suddenly halted, staring about in apparent dismay. "Where'd that Mexican go?" he exclaimed. "He drove a ranch rig in here. . . . Ez! Step out in the street and see if that hombre's in sight!"

Ezra pushed through the crowd on his errand before Bagley or anyone else could protest the move. They saw him gaze down the street, only to start off running. He was gone for several minutes. Bagley glared at Pat disgustedly.

"Expect him back, do yuh?" he scoffed.

Ezra did come back, leading a buckboard in which a Mexican rode, venting guttural imprecations. Men gathered about the rig, wondering what Pat might reveal.

"Search that wagon," he said, scanning it narrowly.

Many hands grabbed at the tumbled tarp in the wagon-box, hauling it aside. Suddenly there was a shout. A man held up a gunny sack leaking bundled currency from its holes. It was the bank money, found where it was least expected, and in the nick of time. Pat eyed the nonplused marshal across the wagon with hard intent.

"There's your loot, Bagley. All of it, from the looks," he grunted. "Now call off your dogs. Even *you* can't accuse me of hidin' it in such a place!"

14.

"Things are not nearly as black as you paint them, Bagley. A couple of those bandits got away, yes; but two others are dead, and a third one caught. With this ranger's help, Stevens and his friends succeeded in blocking the robbery." Hafner, the Marfa banker, was speaking straight from the shoulder. "Near as I can determine, your biggest beef seems to be that you weren't called in to engineer the whole business."

It was strong talk, calculated to demolish for good and all the marshal's querulous theme that in refusing to consult him, Pat and Doc Hall had gravely endangered the security of the town. They were gathered in Bagley's office, where the Mexican had been escorted immediately after the discovery of the bank's money in his wagon.

"Dammit all, Hafner, I was appointed t' keep law and order!" Bagley blared hotly. "Yuh can't deny there's funny goin's-on here, with one owlhoot excused as a ranger spy—a girl mixed up in the business—an' Stevens knowin' jest where t' lay hands on this Mex, when it was a case of savin' his own hide!"

The clear insinuation that Pat was still mixed up somehow in the robbery disgusted even Hafner. A few townsmen strove to shame Bagley out of his stiff-necked attitude, offering some cutting comments. But Pat insisted on explaining his hunch for the benefit of all.

"I learned a week or so ago, up in Colorado, that there was a Mexican in that gang," he declared. "He didn't show up with the others when they rode in to do this job; but I smelled a rat the instant this hombre here drove into the livery yard while they were in the bank. I thought he was bringing

their rifles, and when I found that wasn't the case, it threw me off for a few minutes—"

"Ees all a big lie!" roared the Mexican, beginning to recover from Ezra's mauling. "I know notheeng about, I tal you! I never know thees money is in my wagon at all!"

Pat eyed the glowering man sharply. "Makin' tracks awful fast, weren't you?" he inquired softly. "For a man who had no reason to run."

"I was scared—that's why I go!" the fellow cried. "When thees gringo start shootin', Pancho ees leave!"

"What if he's tellin' the truth?" Bagley growled.

Pat brushed aside these protests as pointless. "Dyer an' McGill knew the money would hamper their getaway," he went on coolly. "After they gathered it up, Rip slipped out the back door of the bank an' cached it in the wagon, under that tarp. Either they all figured to meet at a rendezvous later, or McGill expected to stop the wagon on the road and pick up the money when the heat was off. . . . It was a shrewd scheme, and it might have worked. But the operation took Rip a shade longer than he expected, and that tipped me off."

"If McGill sneaked out the back way with the loot," heckled Bagley sourly, "why didn't he jest keep goin'?"

"Because that would have given his carefully planned play away," retorted Pat scornfully. "Don't forget that Rip was acting under Dyer's orders, either. Like it or not, he did as he was told."

The Mexican strove to give voice once more to vociferous protestations of innocence. Doc Hall quickly shut him up, snapping a pair of Bagley's manacles on the man.

"Take him in charge, Ace," he directed easily. "You've got one of the holdups. If you have any trouble getting his story out of him, I'll help you—"

"Wal, it ain't this feller I'm worried about," Bagley tossed back gruffly. "What about that other hombre? I'm servin' notice right now that he ain't gettin' away neither—"

Hall looked him grimly in the eye. "Didn't yuh hear me before?" he inquired with noticeable softness of tone. "I told you Ambler's one of my men. Don't make any mistake about what that means. I know it looks bad, as things turned out; and that's why we've put the boy under ranger protection. He was doin' work you wouldn't have been able to manage in a thousand years. . . . You'll never lay a hand on him, Bagley!"

"I'll inform the commissioners how you're takin' it on yoreself t' supersede my authority," the marshal threatened blusteringly.

"Don't forget the ranger captain for this district, too," Doc rejoined agreeably. "He'll thank yuh for a report of my work I won't bother to turn in. And while we're about it," he added with infuriating calm, "I'll give yuh better reason to complain, Bagley. Here comes Ambler from the doctor's office now. He's all patched up, good as new, an' I'm takin' him with me."

Bagley's thick features turned bilious. "Yuh mean yuh refuse to let him be held—a known outlaw?" he rasped.

"That's right." Hall nodded. "The ranger service owes him plenty, Ace. I wouldn't have anything happen to him—like your well-known brand of justice, for instance."

Ambler stepped in the door at that moment, a bandage encircling his head. His dogged expression said that he had come here, fully expecting to face the music.

"Howdy, Ambler." Pat smiled. "Feel better now?"

Jack met his look gloomily. "Julie—" he began.

Pat's faint warning headshake halted him. "Glad you're here," Stevens proceeded smoothly. "We're about to lay plans for goin' on after McGill and Dyer. As town marshal, it's not Bagley's job—and Hall thinks you'll be willin' to ride with us."

Ambler alerted as the shock of unexpected freedom ran over his strained nerves, but he failed signally to exhibit any marked elation.

"Where'll they head now?" he wanted to know.

"Straight for the Big Bend," Hall answered positively. "They know they're plenty hot, Ambler, after this fiasco. They'll run for cover—and that's the nearest, and just about the safest for their kind, anywhere."

Pat measured the ranger curiously. "You plannin' to go down there yourself?" he queried.

Doc's grin was chilly. "I would in a pinch, Stevens," he assured Pat simply. "Not that it would do any good. I'm too well-known in this country to ride ten miles down there unnoticed. . . . I was hopin' I could count on you to get me off the hook—"

Pat's assent was immediate. "We'll go on, of course. Our account with Dyer isn't settled by a long chalk. I intend to grab him, with help or without it."

"Fine," Hall exclaimed. He frowned then. "Of course, yuh know the Bend isn't an easy place to get into. It's almost a country by itself, Stevens."

"So I understand." Pat was unmoved. "I've already considered that. Wherever Rip McGill goes, I think we'll be able to follow somehow."

Bagley was attending this talk with faint scorn. "Ridin' down into the Big Bend, huh? Who shall we notify, Stevens, if yuh don't come back?"

Hall glanced at Pat in some amusement. "We better talk this over in greater detail. Shall we move out where the air's fresher?"

Bagley watched with suppressed fury as they stepped indolently out of his office. Sam winked at him jovially over his shoulder. "Sorry yuh won't be in on the reward, Bagley," he said. "But we'll remember that yuh wished us luck."

The marshal fumed impotently, slamming the door on Sam's heels. Ace had yet to arrange for the burial of Harris and Kildean, and he did not relish the chore.

Hall led the way to the hotel, where they settled com-

fortably in chairs lining the gallery. Marfa had returned once more to its wonted activities, and they were not molested beyond an occasional curious stare.

"What do you suggest, Hall?" Pat opened up.

The ranger shook his head slightly, looking bothered. "No point in yore rushin' off half-cocked after that pair," he replied. "They'll be behind the wall, with the gate shut, before yuh come anywhere near. It'll be a long hunt. Yuh won't," he added dryly, "get anywhere by just pickin' up and shovin' off down there, either."

Pat's brows knit. "You mean this Cortina's guerrillas?"

Hall laughed humorlessly. "That's only one bunch," he growled. "The Bend is crawlin' with wanted men—as well as Mexican bandits working the border on their own."

"That bad, is it?"

Doc's glance was dour. "Stevens, every single man in that strip of country is either an outlaw, or a law enforcement officer on his trail. And they all know it!"

The prospect was less terrifying to Stevens and his companions than might be supposed. They had passed through similar situations before and emerged unscathed. Pat recognized the difficulties confronting them, however.

"What yuh say is bound to make it hard to locate Dyer's crowd," he observed philosophically.

Hall was watching him shrewdly, approval in his ice-blue eyes. "Yuh take it easy," he commented in turn. "I begin to think yuh might do a job down there at that, Stevens."

Sam Sloan showed his snaggle-toothed grin. "We could've relieved yore mind sooner, Hall, if you'd asked. Why do yuh suppose me an' Ez put up with his bossy ways, if it wasn't for gittin' results?"

"Have you got a plan, Hall?" Pat interrupted this banter matter-of-factly.

"Yes, and no." The ranger fell into musing abstraction, gazing away. "It ain't altogether clear to me yet, but something's got to be rigged. . . . When do yuh plan to start?"

"Whenever yuh say," Ezra threw in impatiently. "Tell us what t' do an' we'll git about it—"

Still the cool-eyed ranger put him off, pondering. Such comments as he made thereafter were not particularly illuminating, but he left the impression that there were certain arrangements of his own which he was desirous of completing.

He did consent to offer a cursory sketch of current conditions in the Big Bend. Never lending itself to outstanding order, just now the territory was more or less under the domination of the swashbuckling Mexican general, Juan Cortina, who was in the irritating habit of bolstering his endless campaigns below the border with levies of American horses and other supplies, obtained through the lawless element of either race hiding out in the Bend country.

"Cortina's pelados have overrun the Rio Grande, Stevens," Hall declared. "You'll have to find some way to get along with them—in appearance at least—or else go under. Make a hit with 'em, and they're perfectly capable of handing McGill and Dyer over to yuh. But not as law officers. Don't make any mistake about that."

They talked a while longer, and finally the ranger left, his sole advice being that they would do well to pull out at night, and before too long a time had elapsed.

"We'll see yuh again, o' course?" Sloan put in.

Hall seemed uncertain. "Yuh may, or yuh may not. Don't let that bother yuh none. Whatever I work out, I'll play my own hand."

He nodded farewell and sauntered off upstreet, a deceptively indolent, self-reliant figure. For half an hour the four friends discussed their position, rising at length to go in search of dinner. Since nothing was to be gained by deliberate delay, they arranged to pull out that night, and preparations for departure took up the greater part of the afternoon.

In Marfa Pat disposed of the scrub bronc commandeered at Sand Hills Station. The Bar ES bronc Dyer was riding had been shot, and he had taken Kildean's. But the roan which Puff Harris would no longer need had broken away at the time the outlaws escaped with Julie. It had been picked up, and Ezra and Sam had no difficulty in establishing ownership. This was the horse Pat elected to use.

They checked out of the hotel before dark, and still Doc Hall did not put in an appearance.

"He ain't comin' back," Ezra said with conviction.

"He practically told us as much, when he left," Pat pointed out. "No occasion for any fuss. That Hall's a mighty smooth article in his own way. We'll pull out when we get ready, an' he can play his own cards just as he chooses."

Full dark saw them saddling up in the livery. Ambler was unable to get Julie out of his mind. "Dyer and old Rip'll be fit to be tied over this business," he growled. "An' she's with 'em. Can I help it if I worry about her?"

"Don't even try, Jack," comforted Pat, quietly. "It's to your credit to show a little human feeling. Rip would have been far better off to do the same."

They left town inconspicuously, not courting the attention of any watcher who might find his interest in carrying word of their coming before them into the south. Pat led the way, avoiding all but the dimmest trails. There was a thin sickle moon at this early hour, and they were in no particular haste. A few miles below Marfa they found themselves already in the midst of a savage, lava-fanged country where it not only seemed possible but more than likely for anything to happen.

"Looks empty enough hereabouts," Sloan remarked, gazing about their rugged and ghostly surroundings. "Good country for spooks, I reckon—"

"You're not far wrong there," Pat agreed. "See those shadowy peaks on ahead? That's the Chisos. Spanish for Ghost Mountains."

The rocky heights were aptly named, rising in silvery splendor against the dark, tumbled bulk of the Carmen Range, twenty miles away below the international line.

Cactus appeared with increasing frequency as they passed on south. Now and again they saw patches an acre or more in extent. Lava ledges threatened the legs of the horses. They hauled up at a late hour in a sheltering grove of mesquites. Rest might not be coming their way from here on out, and for the present Pat counseled a strict avoidance of haste.

A brilliant sun, already blistering, awoke them in the morning. Sam Sloan leaped three feet, shaking out a torpid rattler which had shared his blanket during the cool hours.

Little was said this morning, an inner tension gripping them all. Breakfast done, they struck on into the south, riding in a close group. All scanned the enigmatic brush with alert attention, but the morning wore on and they saw absolutely no sign of life.

"Reckon we're well in the Bend now?" Ambler broke silence to ask.

"And have been for hours, boy." Pat nodded.

"Sure. Keep yore wits about yuh," Sam seconded. "Watch us, Ambler, an' be sure t' follow suit. They don't allow for second mistakes down here."

He was enjoying himself immensely, as he invariably did at the prospect of action. Pat's laugh, recognizing the fact, brought a tight grin to Ambler's lips.

The endless mesquite range rolled on as the tumbled shoulders of the Chisos loomed closer. None had ever seen wilder or more forbidding country.

"Dang queer we ain't seen nobody at all—" Ezra groused discontentedly.

The words were little more than out of his mouth when the echoing, hollow *crang-g* of a rifle broke the heavy quiet, coming surprisingly enough from their rear. All jerked to a halt, staring. A second shot rang out, the slug zipping across the tops of the brush near at hand.

"They've circled us, an' they mean business," Sam ripped out. "Come on—we're hittin' for the rocks!"

Hurling the horses forward, they were soon in full flight. Other rifle shots cracked, but they could see nothing at which to direct a return fire. The shooting continued, steady and methodical, forcing them to work gradually up the long slope of the Chisos.

This slope appeared to extend for miles, and they were scarcely halfway up. Ezra reined down on a hump, to peer back intently. He had caught a flash of movement far below.

"Hell!" he burst out harshly. "What's goin' on, anyhow? That ain't no Mexican army down there! It's that ranger Hall that's foggin' us, or I'll eat my boots!"

Arrested by this surprising intelligence, they sat gazing downslope so keenly that none observed what was coming, above and behind them, until the rising clatter of hoofs yanked them around in the saddle.

A reckless band of tatterdemalion Mexicans in enormous hats swept past them at breakneck pace, without casting so much as a look in their direction. Rifles limbering, the wild riders began to pour a hot fusillade down the slope, rushing forward in utter disregard of life or limb.

"Wal, I'll be damned!" ejaculated Ezra, staring at that incredible sight.

Echoing his sentiment, the others watched in frozen surprise. Whatever they expected, they had never looked for any such wild crew of Mexican Tartars as this to come to their aid. They saw Doc Hall break from cover, far below, and skim away in frank flight. His horse, a good one, showed amazing speed and it was only a matter of minutes before the attacking pelados recognized their utter inability to overtake him. They wheeled around and turned back.

"Leave your guns strictly alone, boys, an' let me do the talkin'," Pat muttered. "This looks like a tight squeeze comin' up."

He had not changed position, nor did he do so now. But scanning the dark, wooden faces and wary eyes of this unpredictable Mexican rabble as it advanced, the lean-faced man from Powder Valley understood with grim appreciation the shrewd ruse perpetrated by their friend the ranger. Hall had introduced them to the Big Bend in his very best manner.

15.

There were nearly a dozen men in this heavily armed band which jogged forward with bold confidence to confront the four Americans. Pat's noncommittal glance ran over their ranks thoughtfully. He recognized the breed. They were Chihuahuans, armed surprisingly enough with Winchesters —one of the most uncertain and dangerous combinations known.

One of their number, a burly six-footer of raffish aspect, obviously their leader, pushed his horse to the fore. His glittering black eyes, if not downright hostile, held a cold reserve. Pat greeted him pleasantly, with no break visible in his iron self-confidence.

"Gracias, señor." He nodded. "Yuh came just nicely in time, an' no mistake—"

Crowding forward, the curious pelados surrounded the four as if bent on satisfying themselves once and for all. Their leering faces were more than enough to give any man cause for sober thought.

Ambler alone displayed uneasiness. Pat good-humoredly disengaged the grasp of a swart bandito who would have drawn his carbine from the saddle boot. Ezra as coolly presented the heels of his skittish roan to another who had

been pressing too close; a touch of his spur caused a rear hoof to fly outward in warning.

"Not too close, hombres," the one-eyed man advised. "I git nervous without plenty o' room."

Still these sinister men did not open their mouths, save for a muttered word or two among themselves. It was a ticklish moment. All four understood how narrowly the suspicious eyes were measuring them, inch by inch.

"You go—where?" the burly spokesman demanded gutturally, with great deliberation.

Pat pointed south. "That way, amigo. Fast." He grinned easily.

His interlocutor grunted. The other pelados exchanged blank looks. Manifestly their command of English was rudimentary at best. Pat scanned them comprehendingly.

"We follow hombres—two—and a boy—" he indicated the number with upraised fingers—"who rode this way." Explaining in colloquial Spanish, Pat called attention to the Bar ES brands on his own and the partners' broncs. "You have perhaps seen this brand before, señor?"

"Holy smoke, Stevens!" Ambler broke in, in muttered protest. "You're takin' a long chance, ain't yuh? What if Dyer left a warnin' against us—"

Pat's gesture silenced him. The pelado leader followed this byplay with bland, impenetrable pupils.

"Dy-er," he echoed the name experimentally, as if testing it. "Dyer?"

"Si," assented Pat smoothly. "That man we seek, señor. He went this way, on horses bearing this brand of ours. . . . You saw him?"

The bandit turned to his fellows, the crossed bandoleers jingling faintly on his barrel chest. "Dyer?" he repeated questioningly. They looked at one another, shrugging stolidly. The name conveyed nothing to them, or so they chose to pretend. The leader turned back, spreading his thick hands.

"*No compré.* We do not understand this name," he rattled out rapidly in his native tongue.

Pat nodded, showing no sign of his inner satisfaction. The danger Ambler had suggested was a real one. Had Dyer been able to leave a warning behind him, they might have been forced to acknowledge defeat at the outset. As it was, their mission meant nothing to these border watchers. Moreover, their appearance after so long a time on the trail, with clothes badly worn and beards started, went far to bear out the impression that they were indeed what they seemed—owlhoots on the run. Doc Hall could not have selected a better means of introducing them to the Big Bend than the one he had chosen.

"No matter," Pat returned lightly. "We will go on, señor, with your approval. Soon, if God is good, we will find the men we seek."

Curiously enough, rough as these pelados undoubtedly were, politeness and a dash of piety went far toward propitiating them and allaying their deepest doubts. If the moment had passed when the fate of the four Americans was being debated in their dark minds, they failed to show it.

After a delay, the husky pelado pulled his horse aside. "Go with God, amigos," he growled.

"Gracias." Pat nodded again, as if he had never expected anything else. "We will remember your kindness, my friends."

Without haste, Ezra reined his bronc out and started away. It was to be noted that Ambler clung close to Sloan as they followed suit. The last to depart, Pat lifted his hand in a salute which included all these somber horsemen. The pelado leader responded with a grunt.

"Yuh sure laid it on thick," Ezra grumbled, once they had drawn beyond earshot.

Pat's smile was brief. "That was just the finishin' touch," he returned. "It was Hall who issued us our passport into this jungle. From now on, we're owlhoots."

It began to appear that not soon again would their cre-

dentials be challenged, regardless of how they chose to brand themselves. This bleak triangle of wild country appeared wholly abandoned by God and by man alike as they thrust on south. Ever more savage, gloomy and remote, it was enough to test the endurance of the hardiest.

Brush thinned out as the rocky canyons grew deeper and more difficult to travel. Giant cactus alone sentineled the deep gullies, the sun-blasted ledges and lonely slopes.

"It's one swell hide-out for a man—if he kin live on air," commented Sam, at the end of a long day's travel which apparently had got them nowhere in particular.

"Yeh. Our big mistake was in lettin' Rip and Dyer ever reach this country," seconded Ambler gloomily. Obviously his hopes of locating the two here had long since waned. Nor did it bolster his spirit to recall that Julie was wandering somewhere virtually unprotected in this heartless wilderness.

They hauled up in a stony gulch where a catch basin offered barely palatable water. Snakes lurked in this place and Sloan, particularly sensitive to their crawling menace, shot three within ten minutes.

"Lay off," Ezra roared at his squat partner disgustedly. "Them critters ain't botherin' t' bite anybody as ornery as they are. Yuh reckon they don't know they'd only bend their fangs on yore tough hide?"

The fire reflected its light briefly that night from the gloomy rocks. All were tired, and beyond tethering the horses in a secluded spot, Pat did not bother about extra precautions. Dawn saw them on their way again. They were drawing near the Rio Grande gorge now, the granite plateaus rising higher above their heads. In the torrid afternoon, small Mexican ranchos began to appear, tucked away wherever meager water and a scrap of brushy grazing range offered scant support for a handful of sheep or a goat or two.

Sloan's speculative gaze measured these remote establishments as they rode on past. Silent and for the most part

deserted, the crumbling adobe shacks looked harmless and at the same time somehow forbidding.

"Where can we go, Stevens?" Jack Ambler asked. "We've seen enough to know this country's nowhere near as empty as it looks. Probably more'n one rifle barrel has followed us past these tumble-down ranches. Yuh surely don't hope to just run onto Dyer down here somewhere?"

Pat glanced at him serenely. He knew that monumental and multiplying obstacles had daunted the young fellow from the hour of their departure from Marfa. But Ambler's courage was still stout. It was his understanding alone that was sadly bewildered.

"This game is old as Adam, boy," Pat told him. "It runs along like moves on a checkerboard. Dyer and McGill couldn't altogether avoid us in hell. You'll see."

Far less concerned than their young companion, Ezra's elementary mind was nevertheless fully as puzzled. "Where *will* yuh look, then?" he demanded crustily. "Can't yuh even answer the feller's question?"

Pat's wink at Sam was unruffled. "We'll try Pirate Island for a starter, Ez," he returned. "That satisfy yuh?"

Ezra grunted. He had heard of the place. So unsavory was its reputation even in far-off Colorado, moreover, that when Jack queried him curiously, the big man put him off.

Midday saw them riding out on a windy bluff overlooking the famed canyon of the Rio Grande. The scene here was breathtaking in its savage grandeur. Behind them lay miles of tumbled mountain wilderness. Across the rolling, sinuous brown river rose range on range of craggy peaks, motionless under the blasting sun, hard and bare and featureless as iron.

Unwritten history had had its way with this uncompromising stretch of river. For uncounted years smugglers had crossed in this area undetected; outlaws swarmed in hidden camps. Since Indian days the swarthy bandit generals raiding Texas for cattle and horses had come this way. Murder,

rapine and worse were fireside tales for five hundred miles along the border.

"Where's this Pirate Island, anyhow?" Ezra growled, surveying the wild scene.

Pat delayed, casting about in some doubt, but finally waved toward the west. "That way."

The major canyons, running southward through broken plateau land rimming the Rio Grande on this side, made cross-travel all but impossible in the broken, rocky maze. Forced continually back toward the north, they despaired of ever making time in such ragged country. But in late afternoon a wide chasm opened before them, slanting down toward the river, which Pat said they would follow.

"Watch for trails," he told Ezra, whose trained tracker's eye could be depended on to pick up the least sign on these barren, sun-blackened rocks. In the canyon bed, the lanky one worked from side to side between the cracked and crumbling walls, to return with a triumphant air.

"Trail over yonder," he announced.

They turned that way, but even on reaching it they could hardly believe him. The faint scratch or two of an iron-shod hoof was all that showed.

"Yuh made them marks yoreself," Sam accused.

Ezra only glared at him, and then set out to follow the faint trace. Soon enough they saw where softer rock had received the unmistakable imprint of considerable travel, and even Ambler's waning hopes revived somewhat. Sunset, painting the crags overhead a lurid scarlet, saw them forging steadily on. In the long, silent, orange-tinted afterglow, which seemed to dye the very air with its color, they rode down at last to the river.

"Widenin' out down here," Ezra declared.

It was so. At this point the capricious Rio Grande leveled and spread far, the Mexican mountains drawn back to afford a broad flat. Suddenly they came out on a heavily beaten

trail, plain shoe prints and scattered horse droppings attesting the fact that this was a main-traveled way.

"That must be the island out there." Pat nodded.

Long and shapeless in the soft rosy light, its surface an unbroken snarl of thick mesquite, Pirate Island lay, a two-mile strip of land on this side of the river. Some years back, the international boundary had been defined loosely as following "the present bed of the Rio Grande river." Since that day, the channel had shifted its course, swinging down into Mexico and back, with the result that, actually no true island at all, this two-mile strip, really a part of Mexico in technical fact, lay on the American side, a lost and abandoned fragment under the jurisdiction of neither country.

Outlaws, and particularly the wily breed of Mexican bandits who preyed on the border, required no more. Pirate Island had speedily become a lawless sanctuary knowing no rule save the wayward will of its inhabitants. A man carried his own safety into such a place, and his touch had to be light and sure.

The trail they followed led out into the shadowy brush. Ambler visibly hesitated before shoving his horse that way. Sam grinned at him.

"I won't call yuh no names now, boy. You're plumb right t' be scared. Reckon I am too—a little."

They had barely entered the flat, Pat and Ezra in the lead, when horses could be heard coming their way. In another moment several riders appeared who hauled up sharply at sight of them and then whirled sharply to dash back the way they had come. Pat neither checked nor increased his pace. His lean face, turned forward alertly, revealed nothing whatever of his thoughts. Five minutes of unhurried advance brought them to a thinning of the brush near the center of the flat, and they saw a cluster of adobes ahead.

"Hell's headquarters," Ezra muttered gruffly. It was eloquently suggestive of what they could hope to meet with here.

This settlement might have been as deserted as all the others when they jogged in, except for the rotund, swashbuckling figure advancing in the center of the trail. Yet his fearless glance, above a flowing mustache, and the challenge in his outthrust jaw indicated that he knew himself to be well-covered.

"Howdy, amigo." Pat drew rein, smiling down. "Don't believe we've met before—"

The fierce-looking little man, out of whose obsidian pupils unadulterated evil peered unashamed, tapped himself on the chest importantly.

"I," he said with conscious arrogance, "am Olguin."

If he waited for the announcement to have its effect, Pat did not disappoint him. "No!" the latter exclaimed, in patent surprise. "Not *the* Severio Olguin?"

Olguin drew himself up pompously. "*King* Olguin, hombre," he rumbled. "An' don't you forget eet!"

Pat suppressed a smile. Despite their typical bombast, there was nothing comic-opera about this puffed-up breed. They could one and all turn out to be rank poison at the drop of a hat, as many an arrogant American had doubtless already learned. Olguin's ready command of English was not surprising either. Probably his nefarious exploits deep in Texas had led to his final retirement to this unassailable stronghold.

"All right with me." Pat nodded coolly. "We're just passin' through—"

"What you want in thees place?" the bandit ruler demanded, with the air of an ultimatum.

"Man named Dyer," Pat told him promptly. "There's a McGill with him, too."

"Hang it all, Stevens!" exclaimed Ambler. "One of these days you'll go too far, flingin' them names around!"

Pat did not make the mistake now of attempting to cover up this protest, but turned easily. "Slack off, Jack." He grinned. "Our differences with Dyer can mean nothin' to these men. They don't really care, one way or another."

"Dy-air." Olguin repeated the name, as others had done. His shadowy face expressed nothing. "You 'ave quarrel with thees man, no?"

"Call it that," Pat returned carelessly. "Seen him, Olguin?"

The king of Pirate Island adjusted himself rapidly to the tone of these hard men. "I don't theenk—" he began.

Before he could continue, Pat reached down coolly to grasp him firmly by the shoulder. "Think harder, chum," Pat suggested in a voice that grated like a file. "We don't want to have to take this place apart."

Challenge and defiance passed between them in taut silence. It was Olguin's snaky glance which dropped first. He shrugged free. "They rode west, meester—toward El Paso," he muttered.

Straightening, Pat nodded. It was enough to tell him that Dyer and Rip McGill had ridden through here—probably passing on east.

"Let's go," he told the others.

Turning back down the trail, and keeping a wary lookout, they left Pirate Island behind before darkness at length forced a halt for the night. The uneasy hours wore themselves away where they bedded down in a protected nook far off the trail, and dawn saw them pushing deeper into the river chasm. The walls closed in again; it was rough going through these craggy heights. The time came when towering cliffs put an end to all progress on the American side.

"Where now?" Ambler queried, gazing about these awesome surroundings.

Pat gestured across the river. "Plenty of open going over there," he remarked. Ambler looked at Sam and Ezra, and shrugged.

They splashed across, the horses swimming the last few yards, and, after climbing out, pushed on downstream. In forbidden territory now, at the mercy of any dark-skinned bushwhacker who caught sight of them, they progressed with

double caution. In midmorning they came upon a peon goatherder before he could fade into the brush.

"Where you go?" He covered his fear with a show of bravado.

"What lays that way?" Pat parried, pointing with sweeping arm down the river.

There was a noticeable pause. "Mission Dolores," came the response, as if dragged out reluctantly.

It sounded innocent enough. Pat's acknowledgment was calm. "Then we go there, amigo. Adios."

Shuddering even as he stared, beady eyes covetously taking in their guns, the peon crossed himself devoutly before turning away. He had no more to say—and it seemed enough.

16.

The river canyon closed in as they proceeded. In gloomy shadow they picked their way along the rocky trail a few scant feet above the oily brown flood, still on the Mexican side.

"Hey-y!" sang out Ambler. "Have a look at this—"

All reined in their horses to stare at the bleached skeleton of a man propped in a niche of the granite wall. A rusted Bowie knife, still caught in the gaping rib cage after months of weathering, attested to the manner of death. That the grim spectacle had not even been removed seemed symbolic of this dark and violent land.

A mile beyond, light flooded into the river gorge. On the American side the walls drew back to reveal the mouth of a wide, cliff-girt canyon running down to the Rio Grande.

"Looks like the ruins of a big adobe buildin', acrost there on the bluff," Ezra said.

He was right. The roofless maze of walls looming above the river, crumbling now but still imposing, had once been an edifice of some importance. Still called the Presidio, it unquestionably dated back to the Spanish occupation, and none troubled to guess how far beyond.

"I can see men movin' around up there," Ambler exclaimed tensely.

Pat nodded. "And there's a Mexican down at the edge of the ford. He's lookin' this way—"

"Sure. He's seen us," Sloan concurred tersely. "Ain't botherin' t' pass no signal. They feel safe here."

The fatalistic stolidity of men in the mysterious Big Bend country had long since ceased to surprise them. Inevitably it called forth their own stoic alertness. They rode boldly out to the water's edge and started across.

The crossing proved unexpectedly shallow. At this point countless ox-drawn carts of the Mexican smugglers had splashed toward the promised land. Revolutionists had found it a natural highway. With Pat in the lead, the four forged on, finding irony in the fact that this crossing toward United States territory should coincide with their approach to the most dangerous outlaw hide-out in the Southwest.

The cotton-clad pelado on the far bank moved indolently away as they drew near. Staring back out of slitted black eyes, he did not offer to accost them. Climbing out of the ford, they ignored him, examining with some wonder the imposing features of this broad canyon opening out to their gaze.

Half a mile in width, enclosed by turreted, marble-banded walls, the canyon seemed vast enough to accommodate a city. From the river's brink, the great ruin of the Presidio loomed larger than ever, its broken walls as long as a city block. Climbing up a rocky trail to the level of the bluff, they were struck by the presence of a tiny rock chapel,

still in a state of preservation, crouching against the canyon wall. Its cross rose in lonely dignity against the coppery sky. Sight of the brown-robed padre shuffling in at the door, his leather sandals whispering on the worn stones, fetched a grunt from Ez.

"Dang queer setup," he muttered, peering warily about. "Yuh figure we're sizin' this place up all wrong?"

Pat's headshake was barely perceptible. "These shag-barked pelados from south of the line are a primitive breed," he murmured. "They find nothin' wrong in a mixture of religion and banditry. . . . This country never has been anythin' but Spanish Mexican, anyway—after the Indians. To them, we're rank interlopers, regardless of where the international line may run. You're in a foreign country now."

The appearance of other rough-looking Mexicans wandering about a huddle of wattled, mud-and-brush *jacals* bore out his words. A kind of village plaza extended before the broken-down, red sandstone gateway of the Presidio. Pat spied a disreputable-appearing American leaning indolently against the massive gatepost, who abruptly turned and disappeared inside at sight of them.

"Yuh ridin' in there?" Sloan inquired, low-voiced.

Stevens was in no hurry to decide. "We'll circle this layout first." He indicated the dun-walled Presidio. "Must be a couple of hundred rooms behind those walls. I aim to see what we're walkin' into."

Shoving on, they avoided the scratching chickens in the plaza. Ezra's dancing horse scattered a dozen clamorous dogs of scrawny, half-starved aspect. The Mexicans eyed them stolidly without observable interest, and Ambler pointed out a low, dirt-roofed adobe standing off by itself. A dozen saddled broncs tied to the ramada posts indicated its character.

"Tequila joint," Sam muttered.

If they were watched as they jogged past in the blazing sunlight, no one bothered to put in an appearance. Pat con-

cluded that shabbily dressed Americans were a common sight here.

Passing on, they rode along the uneven wall of the great Presidio building. Fallen almost to the ground in places, it revealed a maze of inner walls forming countless cubicles and corridors. Doorless gaps pierced the adobe at intervals, the whole presenting an appearance of forlornness and desertion. Even the lofty bell towers had been allowed to crumble and sag.

"Army post, yuh reckon?" hazarded Sam, with some interest.

"No doubt in days gone by, this was a busy enough place," agreed Pat, his eyes busy.

Slowly they circled the huge ruin, taking a thorough look. "Ain't seen hide nor hair of Dyer an' McGill here," Ezra growled as they passed back along the blank wall facing the river bluff.

"Not yet." Pat was unruffled. "The owlhoots from up north probably hole up inside this place, and even stable their broncs in there." He paused. "Good idea, for that matter. We'll do the same."

Divining the boldness of what he proposed, Ambler sat straighter. He tightened up pluckily and followed without comment as Pat rounded the corner and made for the main gate. A hard-jawed man stepped out to bar their path as the four rode through.

"Where yuh goin'?" he challenged roughly.

Pat reined his pony directly at the other, forcing him hastily aside. "Take it easy, buster," he growled affably. "We're movin' in out of the weather. Any objections?"

With Ezra's baleful gaze dwelling on him steadily, the outlaw grumpily subsided. The four took time to glance about them curiously.

What had once been a large reception chamber in this roofless wreck of a palace, now formed a sizable patio within the thick walls. A weathered tower dominated it on one side,

and a number of wide openings in the inside walls gave access to a tangle of tumble-down rooms beyond. A glance told that this patio was a public gathering place. A number of horses dozed against the adobe walls, and a flickering campfire in the center served as focal point for nearly a dozen booted and heavily armed men gathered there in familiar informality and craning around curiously to observe the newcomers.

Ambler's jittery eye jumped to Cal Dyer, standing behind four cross-legged card players. McGill was with him, but it was the cat-faced outlaw chief on whom Jack fastened his attention, obviously expecting a crashing gunplay on the instant and showing suppressed astonishment at Stevens for deliberately riding into it.

Nothing of the kind happened. Looking at Pat as if he were seeing a ghost, Rip McGill cursed harshly under his breath, then turned away with a hangdog air. Eyes stony, Dyer only waited in watchful impassivity. Ready for anything, he clearly did not plan to force the first move.

Not far from the fire, the quartet dismounted to face these strange men coolly, Pat at their head. Lazily, a big wide-shouldered man sauntered forward, hard glance sweeping them. "Never saw you birds before," he let drop indifferently. "Bar ES broncs, huh? . . . Wal, now! They're familiar. Reckon you've run into 'em before, Cal?" he tossed over his back.

"I know 'em," was Dyer's toneless answer. He did not attempt to amplify the statement.

"Rip, too," the outlaw spokesman pursued blandly. Moving deliberately near, he leered into Pat's face. "If I'm any judge, Mr. McGill don't want yuh around—"

Pat's blow caught him wholly unprepared, before the sarcastic speech was complete. There was a sodden smack. The beefy owlhoot staggered back, lost balance, and crashed headlong into the fire. No one bothered to follow his antics as he rolled away with ludicrous haste. Another man on the fringe of the group had gone into action swiftly, snatching

his gun out. The weapon bounced at his feet as Ezra's snap shot from the hip ripped a red furrow in the fellow's forearm.

There instantly followed this an electric moment of dead hush, bleak eyes clashing, and then Stevens subtly relaxed. "Anythin' more you'd like to know—or learn fast?" he threw at the man he had slugged, contemptuously.

The big outlaw scowled, shrugging. "Reckon I ain't McGill's keeper," he muttered. "Do as you're a mind to—"

It was their cue to establish themselves without further ado. Pat turned to his companions. "We'll hole up in there." He pointed toward a gaping doorway giving upon a corridor-like space where other doors showed. In silence they led their mounts back there, entering a group of two or three roofless rooms from which it was possible to see much of what went on outside.

"What now?" Ambler queried, on edge with suspense.

"We'll camp," Pat said succinctly.

"But if Dyer decides to give us away to that crowd, Stevens, we'll be cornered in here like rats!"

Pat's smile was dour. "Dyer ain't talkin', boy. Or McGill either. . . . Give us away, and they'll be giving themselves away. Can't yuh see that? They dragged us here. It won't be calculated to make 'em popular with the boys. They both know it."

Ambler turned to attend to his horse. But he was nervously alert for every slightest movement about this sinister place. They all kept to themselves as sunset deepened the bronze-hued sky arching overhead. Jack was finishing his supper in moody silence when suddenly he sprang to his feet and made for the outer doorway. A flicker of color outside had attracted his eye. Reaching the opening, he saw his hunch confirmed.

Julie McGill was moving along the deserted corridor, an expression of lost and forlorn sadness on her lovely face. She was alone.

"Julie!" Ambler ejaculated. "It hardly seems possible to find *you* in such a place!"

The vivid transformation which overspread her features was instantaneous. Like a whirlwind she rushed to him, grasping his arm with clinging steel-like hands. "Oh, Jack! This is plain hell," she half-groaned. "You, too—in this awful place! . . . *Get out!* Hurry! Get out of here while you're still alive—"

He stared at her stricken face, paper-white with the fears gnawing at her plucky spirit. Even as she turned to hurry away, he grabbed for her, too late.

"Julie—come back!" His voice rose. "You must know yore own danger! You can stay with Pat, and me, and the others—"

She rushed on toward the patio, waving him back frantically. He started that way determinedly, only to halt with sudden understanding as Julie stumbled forward to join her father, appearing at the moment. They moved off together.

Whirling, Ambler rushed back to rejoin his friends. "It's Julie," he burst out. "She's here, Stevens—in this damned hole! We can yank her away right now—"

"Un-uh." Pat's cool tone stopped him in his tracks. "Hold your horses, boy. . . . *She's* the main reason why Dyer hasn't already tossed us to the wolves, and damn the consequences. Make a wild play now and you'll never save her," the tall man warned evenly.

Driven half-frantic as he was by knowledge of the girl's nearness, Ambler gave in only after considerable argument. Peering outside as the evening wore on, he saw only the careless outlaws, gathered about their fire, drinking and roistering in light-hearted fashion. It would go on till a late hour, but Pat said they would turn in anyway.

He posted Sam to watch till midnight or thereabouts. Ezra was to follow, and they stretched their blankets. Pat was sleeping soundly when the one-eyed man shook him rudely awake sometime during the small hours.

"What is it?" Pat was instantly alert.

"Listen," hissed Ezra.

Clearly some unusual activity was afoot outside. Late as the hour was, they heard men yelling distantly, and the grating rumble of wagons. "Comin' from down 'long the river," muttered Ez. "But it's around here, too—"

Awakened by the muffled uproar, Sam silently rose to follow as they moved out to the patio yard. Still the racket poured in through the big sandstone gate, and they went over there. The sight that met their night-bewildered eyes drew their breath in sharply. A dull red glow in the sky, thrown up by fires already kindled in the plaza, showed them the dark horde of men who looked like a raggle-taggle army of soldiers, pouring across the ford of the Rio Grande.

"Oh-oh." Ezra's tone was colorless.

"Good gravy! Why, that's a whole Mexican army," Sam exclaimed.

"I'm afraid it is." Pat drew in his upper lip, considering. "Cortina's rabble, beyond a doubt."

If he was asking himself what this unexpected arrival spelled for them, there was little enough doubt of how the outlaw band looked on it. They rolled out of their dirty blankets, shuffled to the gate, and watched with glistening eyes, their voices eagerly rumbling. Pat spied Rip McGill, cocky as any rooster. The old reprobate was frankly elated.

"Knowed they'd git here," he exclaimed gruffly, glowering at Pat and his companions in malevolent triumph. "Now we'll see who our friends are!"

It sounded so much like a forced and deliberate brag that Pat took note of the fact; for McGill obviously expected this mass influx to cancel decisively any vengeful plans entertained by Stevens and his friends.

Meanwhile the bustle grew apace. Great activity was in progress all about them now. Pat started to saunter out into its midst.

"My God, Stevens—come back here!" Ambler called to him

hoarsely. "Yore life ain't worth a plugged nickel if that pack of coyotes turns on yuh!"

Pat paused to glance back at him remotely. He heard, but he gave no sign. Then he went on, disappearing behind an unloading supply wagon. This ragged army was busy at a thousand tasks, officers calling guttural orders and men running hither and yon, shouting, more than a few of them drunk. Horses stamped and whistled, milling. The din was terrific.

A rear guard of camp followers had already caught up. Women, gypsy horse handlers, and even a scattering of children were in evidence. In this confusion, Pat's slow strolling presence was not noted. He watched it all with cool detachment, stilling abruptly at sight of a straight-backed, elderly officer.

Calm and resigned amidst this pandemonium, the man was not a Mexican, but a European by his looks, though he wore the gilt-braided uniform common to Mexican officers of considerable rank. Certainly the ragged, musket-toting soldados heeded him with deferential respect.

Making his mind up quickly, Pat accosted this man. "Stevens is the name." He smiled. "Glad to run across a calm man in all this racket—"

The officer stared sharply. Used to forming snap judgments, he did not delay now.

"Woll is my name, Stevens. I was—a general once." A thin smile quirked the stern lips. "You are one of the men awaiting us here, I presume?" There was a foreign burr to the clipped and dry voice.

Pat's continuing smile might have meant anything. "I hope this—" he indicated the noisy activity surrounding them —"doesn't spell more grief for Texas, General?"

"No," Woll said quietly. "Cheno's recruiting the men with a rest. It's a chance to pick up the beef and extra horses expected here, also. We'll be crossing the river again in a few days—a week—maybe a month." He shrugged expressively.

Pat understood. These were indeed Cortina's forces, Cheno being the great man's nickname. Pat gathered, in fact, even more than Woll may have intended he should as they talked on. The Coloradan's face was sober when, half an hour later, he returned to his friends, leading them back to the horses with a jerk of his head.

"Cortina expected to meet Dyer and McGill here," he announced. "They were supposed to supply cattle and a herd of horses for the army—"

"Ouch! An' *we* blocked that, ourselves." Sam pretended to wince at the unsavory news. "It sure puts us in one beautiful spot, if the Mexes ever hear how it happened!"

Pat's nod was slow. "At any rate, we landed Dyer and Rip in a terrific jam by chasin' them down here empty-handed. They'll wriggle out of it if a way offers."

"At our expense!" Ambler said explosively. His face was pale and hard. "We can't face this, Stevens. McGill will squeal on us to save Julie—not to mention his own neck! We've got to grab her an' clear out, or we're sunk!"

To his consternation, the still-faced man stood firm.

"No, we'll see this thing through, boy." Pat spoke in a measured tone, impossible to mistake for impetuosity. "I don't believe in huntin' dynamite with a lighted match—but as yuh say, Julie's in this with us all. It's to her interest that we stick—"

"But hang it all, that may be too late!"

Pat answered with a single word, and it was final.

"Wait."

17.

Not that night did the rag-bag army of General Cortina bed down for rest, if the hubbub emanating from their widespread bivouac was any criterion. Three o'clock in the morning was the hour of their arrival. By dawn the sprawling camp was still a veritable ant heap of agitated activity. The noise alone was enough to wake one from the dead.

Sunrise heralded the opening of another blazing, sultry day in the airless canyon. Still a spirit of devil-may-care recklessness seemed to imbue the outlaws holed up in the old Presidio. Before breakfast was fairly over, a bottle could be seen circulating among them about the fire. An hour later they moved boldly out onto the sandy bluff overlooking the Rio Grande. A blanket was spread, and the cards shuffled. Soon an engrossing stud poker game was in progress.

"Purty cocky, they are," muttered Ezra, watching these proceedings with a jealous eye. "Case o' Nero fiddlin' while Rome is gittin' hot round the edges, if yuh ask me. . . . Sure like t' listen in on their talk," he added after a moment.

"Hell, it's that poker game yuh can't keep yore itchin' fingers out of," Sam said scoffingly. Knowing his lanky partner as he did, he was not far wrong. But for once Pat was inclined to support Ezra's stand.

"Might pay off at that, to know what they make of this business," he observed quietly.

Ezra required no more. He shambled forward and accosted the card players in a tone he knew how to render gruffly careless. "Any reason a man can't git in this game?" he queried.

They glanced up at him measuringly. Cal Dyer had taken a hand. His round, feline face expressed nothing, nor did he

speak. The brawny owlhoot whom Pat had slugged last night, Durkin by name, grinned wolfishly.

"Offerin' us revenge, are yuh?" He appeared raffishly indifferent to whom he played with, so long as it proved fast and exciting. "Cover yore hand with spendin' stuff, old boy, and you're in—long as yuh can stand the gaff. O' course we foller house rules." He leered, serving notice that any evidence of sleight-of-hand manipulation of the cards would be dealt with according to its dubious merits.

Ezra hunkered down with a noncommittal grunt and was dealt in. Sam Sloan wandered out and took up a careless position behind the big redhead, to cover him and observe the proceedings. A few minutes later Rip McGill put in an appearance, bearing a fresh bottle of liquid lightning which he had gone to procure, and he too got into the game.

Pat waited long enough to assure himself all was proceeding quietly, and turned away. He returned to the horses and fell to making repairs on a weakened saddle cinch. He was busy with that when young Ambler came hurrying to him half an hour later.

"There's a big row startin' out there, Stevens," he said portentously. "We both know Ez oughtn't to've got into that damned game—"

"Is it anythin' he can't handle by himself?" Pat looked up from his task mildly. "Sam's out there, too, Ambler. Between 'em, they're pretty near a foolproof combination."

Jack returned restlessly to stare out the big gateway. He loitered there. Not for a minute this morning had he ceased to keep a vigilant watch for Julie, but up to the present the girl had failed to appear. Ambler didn't know what to make of it. Ten minutes later he sought Pat's side again.

"I tell yuh, Stevens, that Rip is tryin' his hardest to pick a quarrel with Ez," he declared urgently. "Dyer is pushin' it, too. They're out there yellin' their heads off—"

Pat could not suppress a grin. "Ezra must be gettin' into

their pockets." He chuckled. "Leave it to him to sting them where it'll hurt the worst."

But it was not the outlaws' pockets on which Ezra's uncanny skill with the pasteboards had levied toll. Before Pat could get out there himself to see what was going on, the one-eyed giant came striding in through the gate, with Rip McGill at his heels and arguing heatedly at every jump.

"Stow yore gab," Ezra whirled to snarl at him. "Yuh got in that cutthroat game of yore own accord. You an' Dyer put up them Bar ES roans, thinkin' yuh couldn't lose—and I won 'em. Now I'm claimin' my winnin's!"

Pat's twitching brows hoisted as he comprehended the nervy deal which Ezra appeared bent on shoving through. With a verve not uncommon to him, the big man had won back the stolen broncs; and he was firmly fixed on thrusting home their losses to the luckless outlaws.

That the moment might be packed with dynamite, not even Pat could deny. The quarrel had broken up the game outside on the bluff. Cal Dyer's usually blank face was thunderous. The other outlaws followed him into the patio, far less concerned over the game's outcome, but waiting with the voracity of wolves to learn whether fireworks were to result, with the crashing swiftness characteristic of this unheeding breed.

Dyer halted there in the patio, leveling a finger at Ezra. "Don't try to touch those horses," he rifled coldly.

Ezra gave him a burning stare, and shrugged. "Yuh played an' lost, Dyer," he reminded the outlaw stolidly. "These other fellers seen it. Yore hard luck—"

He started to step toward the crumbling doorway behind which the Bar ES roans were stabled. Pat arrested him with a hand on his arm. "Let's not rush matters, Ez," he advised quietly. "If yuh won back the horses, all right—they're not goin' anywhere. Let's leave 'em where they are for now."

The crusty giant's brows jacked up. "Dang it, Pat, I won them broncs square!" he protested vehemently.

Misinterpreting altogether Pat's motive for halting the other, Dyer was grinning sardonically. "Pure imagination, big boy. Just try to lay hands on 'em!" he scoffed threateningly.

Pat stifled Ezra's explosive rejoinder, leading him away. Instantly they were beyond earshot, however, the lanky one turned on him hotly. "What's the idea, blockin' the neatest trick I ever took?" he demanded.

"You ought to know." Pat was grimly cool. "Can't you see how near yuh came to tippin' the apple cart?"

Ezra remained suspicious. "Spell it out," he growled.

"Why, those gents are countin' on the horses to clear them with Cortina's rabble. Haven't you got it yet?" Pat's talk was crisp and decisive. "Once they lose those broncs, they'll do a sneak away from here an' leave us holdin' the bag—four against an army! Takin' the horses now would be the craziest move you ever made!"

Ezra swiftly sobered. "Mebby you're right, at that," was the extent of his concession. Whatever else he had been about to add was cut off by a rising clamor in the patio which drew their attention and brought them whirling around.

But it was not any fresh aggression on the part of Dyer's crowd this time. The outlaws were facing toward the outer gate, where a score or more of Mexican soldiers were crowding into the patio with General Woll, the officer whom Pat had met, at their head.

"Which of you," the general tossed at the knot of outlaws, "is called Dyer?"

Pat saw Dyer hesitate, asking himself shrewdly what this presaged. But the summons could not be ignored. Cal took a step forward. Woll eyed him sharply, and nodded.

"Perhaps you'll accommodate us with a conference. Now, at once," he clipped off, with a conclusive air which said refusal was not among the possibilities to be considered.

Dyer swaggered out. "Cortina's idea, I take it?" he growled as if weighing his consent.

Woll shook a curt negative. "As a matter of fact, no. The general is concerned with affairs of state—at Boquillas. He will arrive, I assure you, and we are preparing a report for His Excellency." A thin smile wreathed the disciplined lips. "You may safely deal with me, my friend. I am fully authorized to conduct the general's affairs."

There followed some more or less formal wrangling, with Dyer obviously holding out for a delay. But he could find no valid excuse for putting the moment off. A conference was arranged in the open space outside the Presidio walls and Dyer and McGill reluctantly moved that way.

Pat nudged Ambler as a curious crowd gathered out there. "We'll take this in," he murmured. "Dyer'll be asked to produce his cattle an' horses, an' there may be an explosion. I want to know when it comes."

Leaving Sam and Ezra to watch the horses, they moved over to the gate. The milling rabble in the plaza would have been highly colorful had it not presented an even more sinister aspect. Guns and ugly-looking machetes were carelessly evident in this ragged army. In its center a circle had been left, across which Dyer and the other outlaws faced General Woll, surrounded by several gaudy Mexican officers of various rank.

After brief formalities, Woll inquired politely whether the Americans were prepared to supply the promised stock. Pat's eyes widened at the number of cattle he named. Dyer ducked that one, clinging shrewdly to the question of payment, which he pretended to find important.

"Mr. Dyer—" the general at length shut off his haggling, with a dignified show of military pomp—"did you bring badly needed beef for my soldiers—or did you not?"

"Let's not get in a hurry." Cal was doggedly gruff. "Wait till yuh see the hossflesh I brought for you an' Cortina, Woll—"

The officer glared at him blankly. "Horses?" he rasped. "Are you telling me there's no beef for my hungry men?"

Woll's insistence on the one commodity he was unable to supply daunted Dyer. Nor did he relish the growing storm of growls from the Mexicans hemming him and his friends in.

"Understood this was to be a private talk, Woll," he ripped out arrogantly. "Have we got to put up with this damned uproar and crowdin'?" He strove mightily to register righteous indignation.

General Woll only stared at him stonily. "More evasion," he snarled contemptuously. "Perhaps that answers me fully!" He allowed a long, pregnant moment of silence to drift by. "*Why* haven't you brought the beef herd you promised, man?"

Dyer grasped at the question, ignoring Rip McGill's worried muttering at his side.

"Why?" he flared angrily. "I'll tell yuh why! Because we was flogged an' hounded all the way down here from Colorado—that's why! An' furthermore, I'll tell yuh who did it—"

Pat sensed Ambler's rigidity at his side, as Dyer whirled dramatically to stab an accusing finger straight in their direction, deep hatred and baffled fury in the gesture.

"There's the hombre!"

But a rising rumble from this aroused guerrilla force drowned out anything further the outlaw strove to articulate. A hair-raising buzz filled the plaza as the pelados gathered at last that no juicy Texas beef was to be forthcoming at the conclusion of these negotiations. General Woll, waving a clenched fist at Dyer and his companion, was unable to make himself heard.

Dyer himself was rapidly losing what little temper he had managed to retain, seemingly oblivious for the moment of the situation of grave peril rapidly building up for him and his defenseless comrade. The crowd began to sway, shoving him this way and that. Weapons were brandished threateningly.

"*Dyer!*" Pat hurled the name over the bobbing heads, with the full strength of his leather lungs. "Make your break! Get over here, you fool, before they tear yuh down! The walls will save yuh!"

Indifferent to whether General Woll heard him now or not, he watched Dyer pause to gauge his position. Next moment, the outlaw plunged forward, McGill at his heels, the two knocking the surprised pelados out of the way with reckless abandon in their determined dash for the gate.

They made it. Dyer flung Pat a piercing glance as he thrust inside, McGill staggering behind him, his clothes torn. Sam and Ezra came running, attracted by the fresh uproar. A gun crashed, once and again, as the white-clad soldiers started to crowd in through the gate.

"Back up!" the fierce, one-eyed giant roared at them, waving his Colt in their faces menacingly. "*Git*, yuh lily-livered excuse for an army! Clear outa here, pronto!"

The tide paused. Noting the better than a dozen stern Americans facing them, ready for anything that might develop, the peons grudgingly gave ground. Still Ezra crowded them back. Before some heedlessly directed bullet could set off this teetering powder keg, General Woll's deep-toned voice could be heard, bellowing the imperative order for a retreat.

The pelados withdrew, casting evil glares behind them, but leaving the gateway open. Standing there under reprieve of imminent death, Dyer was the first to speak, relaxing with dogged courage typical of his kind.

"Hard lines, Stevens," he growled, with a mirthless grin. "But I ain't sure yuh didn't land yoreself smack in the middle of this!"

Pat was curt. "Get yore friends busy," he said. "We'll throw some of those old beams across the gate. It'll make a barricade of a sort. We may need it yet."

Ancient balks, once crowning the Presidio walls and supporting its roof, lay about haphazardly. A few were dragged forward and flung down across the opening in the wall, affording a thin promise of respite in the event of a determined attack.

Looking out, Pat saw the army camp in a turmoil, knots

of angry peons gathering and jabbering heatedly, gesturing toward the Presidio. General Woll had retired, probably to lay his plans for combating this stalemate. The outlaws kept a wary watch, Pat and the partners moving among them without comment.

Ambler was watching the horses alone when a flurry of movement jerked him around to face the door. Julie McGill stood there, her face pale. "Jack!" she exclaimed, probing his hard young face with beseeching gaze. "I blamed Ezra before, for almost causing trouble about the horses. But what will happen now?" Her tone was tight.

"God knows!" He could not stifle that involuntary exclamation. "Yuh better stay here with me, Julie," he drove on as steadily as he could manage. "I'll watch out for yuh—"

"But this is all so impossible! It's Father I'm the most worried about. And he doesn't care! We must get him away—" She broke off, seeing his face set. "Oh, *can't* we all leave here some way—at once?"

"How?" He killed her blind hope bluntly. "We're surrounded, kid—penned in here like rats. It's up to Stevens from here out. He'll get himself and his friends away, if that's possible. I'm not sure just how much he loves yore dad . . ."

He interrupted himself at the sound of harsh voices, reaching them loudly from the patio. Something was afoot out there.

"Cover them hombres!" Dyer's whipcrack tones rang out. "They're up to some game—headin' this way!"

"*Hold it!*" Stevens exclaimed quickly. "That's Woll, comin' back again—under a flag of truce. He wants a talk . . ."

"Damn his talk!" Dyer yelled belligerently. "I'll gut shoot him—"

"Do that, an' I'll hamstring you! . . . Wait. I'll handle this." Pat strode boldly to the gate. When the general had plodded up, he nodded curtly. "What'll it be, Woll?"

Woll gestured to the sentries accompanying him, and clambered up on the pile of beams. His cold eye swept the

patio, lingering on McGill and Dyer, and then returned to Pat.

"We want those two men. Falsifying their promises, they're no different from deserters. This," he said heavily, "can't be avoided, Stevens."

"Yuh mean Dyer and Rip? Yuh want to shoot 'em, eh?" Pat paused as the outlaws waited for his reply. "That's simple. Take 'em—if you can, Woll," he retorted flatly.

The renegade general's calculating glance was running over the impregnable walls behind which the quarry had taken refuge. It was not difficult to follow his cunning thought.

"I can do that, if I must. It'll save time," he proceeded in a lowered tone, "if you'll hand Dyer and his friend over—in your own way, of course, Stevens."

"I see." Pat understood the bargain being dangled before him. "Yuh mean the rest of us will be handed a safe conduct out of this rat trap if we do. Is that it?"

"You have it, my friend." Woll nodded ingratiatingly. "My personal guarantee of safety, for you and your friends, in exchange for those two—persons, within an hour. I doubt if I can hold off my men longer," he added with thin significance.

"Speak up, over there!" Dyer called out harshly. "We can't get what you're sayin'!"

"Is it a deal, Stevens?" Woll demanded, still in his rapid undertone.

Pat's face was wooden as he faced the man. "Anythin' better to offer, General? . . . No?" Suddenly his voice changed to a rasp. "Then get down off that barricade and go on about your business. Sorry, I can't see my way to deal with a treacherous skunk like you. Get goin'!"

Woll hastily retired, staring back with a puzzled air as he went. A smirk stole over Rip McGill's haggard face, and Dyer was gruff.

"He acted like yore turn-down made him plumb mad, Stevens. Reckon I knowed yuh wouldn't throw us fellers down—"

Pat whirled on him, grim of manner. "Don't fool yourself any, Dyer! It's not on your personal account I'm doin' this. I'm with yuh now, and I'll stick with yuh up to the scratch —but get this, and get it straight: I never would back a pack of crooks like you of my own accord. This isn't a case of Americans against Mexicans, or anythin' of the sort. It's a matter of human lives against ravening wolves. Now get off yore brag, and act like yuh were grown up!"

18.

If Cortina's ragged corps had never heard of the military device known as a war of nerves, they appeared thoroughly to understand the principle involved. An hour dragged by, and the diminutive garrison barricaded inside the old Presidio might have meant nothing to the churning horde of men filling the plaza. Fists were waved in their direction, and the silent sandstone gateway was given a wide berth. But nothing whatever happened, while the slow-ticking minutes contributed inevitably to the heavy atmosphere of suspense.

Pat knew a council of war was in progress out there between General Woll and the other officers. Beyond a doubt the Presidio would presently be stormed. By sheer coolness and force of will, Pat had constituted himself commander of the tiny group of defenders. His simple preparations proceeded so serenely that Ambler questioned whether the others realized the full seriousness of their dilemma.

The barricade across the gate was built higher, and sev-

eral of the outlaws posted themselves directly behind it. Others climbed to the top of the wall, to crouch below its parapet. At Pat's direction the big outlaw, Durkin, and another man clambered up through the ruined tower to a point enabling them to survey the outer walls.

Durkin had barely reached his position before calling down through the thick morning hush. "Gang o' hombres prowlin' along the side wall out here, Stevens!" he announced harshly.

"Give 'em a blast or two to break it up," Pat called back. "But no target practice, Durkin. We can't waste lead!"

The owlhoot's carbine cracked. It brought forth a rattle of musketry from below, and dust puffed from the tower walls. The balls did no damage.

"Keep a sharp watch there at the gate," Pat warned.

Sam was behind the barricade. He ducked and turned. "That shootin's makin' 'em mad," he called. "They're surgin' up this way. Ain't no officers with 'em, neither! This is a mob o' mad dogs!"

The white-clad soldados rolled toward the gate in an angry wave, yelling and throwing up their guns. Their words could not be made out, but it was plain that they meant to seize Dyer and McGill. Pat watched them swing forward till it seemed he must surely be delaying too long.

"This may be it," he muttered tersely. "Let 'em have all yuh got, boys—"

A dozen guns crashed out in unison, a fusillade flying out over the barricade. Hit in the legs, a couple of peons went down, and a third screamed in pain. The line wavered and then broke. Pat saw an officer dart forward, yelling at the rioting pelados and waving them angrily back.

"That wasn't an organized sortie," he said. "This rabble is showin' signs of gettin' out of hand. No tellin' how soon the real push'll come—"

A line of battle was thrown up raggedly across the plaza, the soldiers taking an occasional potshot toward the im-

pregnable walls. It became harder to determine what went on out there as military order slowly superseded chaos.

Dyer was as defiant as ever, striding about the patio like a caged cougar. Pat caught him making for one of the doorways leading back into the mysterious rear portion of the ruin. "Get out there an' stay with the men, where you're needed, Dyer," he ordered curtly. "I know you'd like to do a sneak through the back to save your own skin. Not this time!"

Cal's snarl of blustering contempt said that Pat had hit the mark accurately. "I'll fight as long as you do, Stevens!"

"See that yuh do, then."

It seemed less important what Rip McGill might find to do with himself. If not yet demoralized by fear, the old bluffer was thoroughly rattled, prowling about restlessly as if lost, fingering his gun and muttering to himself. Ambler saw Julie watching her parent with commiseration from one of the inner doors. He moved toward her.

"Julie, you *must* stay back under cover," he urged. "Slugs are flyin' around here, and it'll get worse!"

She seemed scarcely to have heard what he said. "Jack, I'm worried to death about Father! Can he hope to come out of this alive—can any of us?"

Unself-consciously her hands grasped his arm in dumb supplication. Ambler could not help marveling at her continuing stoutness of spirit and her blind loyalty. She seemed to have all but forgotten her own very real predicament in her concern for this worthless father.

Useless to point out to her the fact that Rip had got himself into this fix! In an anguish of apprehension for her alone, Ambler rose to the heights of guile.

"Julie, it's strictly on yore own account that yore Dad stuck it out till things have come to this pass," he declared soberly. "With you once in the clear, we'd break this combination up in a hurry!"

She studied his face with questioning eyes. "But I can't fly," she reproached simply.

His arm circled her urgently. "No. But yuh can hide, Julie—"

"In this place?" She shook a slow negative. "No, Jack. Not anywheres that those wild wolves wouldn't certainly find me in the end. It's not possible!"

He waved the idea aside impatiently. "Not here. But there's that chapel, Julie. That's sanctuary for all. They wouldn't dare touch yuh there! I could talk the padre into keeping yuh safe—"

She caught at that. "And you believe—Father would be better off if I was out of this altogether?" Only too plainly she was relying implicitly now on his superior judgment.

Ambler laughed her hesitations gently to scorn. "Can yuh question it?" he countered, throwing all his persuasion into the argument. "Why do yuh suppose Pat voted for makin' a stand here—for love of Cal Dyer?"

She reached her decision swiftly, hard as it was for her to face. "If only we can reach the chapel—"

"Come on!" He turned instantly, before second thoughts could halt her. Pushing through the crumbling doorway, he led the way back into the lonely maze of the ruin, and within a matter of minutes succeeded in thoroughly losing himself. Stumbling and hurrying, they worked down a long brush-cluttered corridor, and after some cautious reconnoitering, Ambler led the girl to a breach in the massive wall. With bated breath they peered out. The river bluff lay before them, empty of life. Below wound the rocky trail leading up from the ford.

"We'll climb down there," Ambler muttered, "an' reach the chapel before anyone spots us."

They worked downward, panting and scrambling over the jagged rocks. Scarcely had they gained the trail when a raucous outburst of sardonic laughter made them spin around. Half a dozen Mexicans were within a dozen yards, stepping

into the trail around the boulder behind which they had lain in ambush. Ambler went tense as Julie swiftly stifled a scream.

"Keep yore head, now," he snapped at her sharply. "Our only chance is to get back with Pat and the others!"

She saw clearly enough that they were cut off from any hope of reaching the chapel. From the brutal smirk on their faces, these jackals belonging to Cortina asked no better than to grab a girl for hostage. Ambler they wouldn't be so particular about. Keeping in front of the young fellow to cover him, she began to crowd toward the rocky slope.

"Hurry, Jack!" she whipped out, low and tense. "Duck in among the rocks before they . . ."

She had no chance to finish. Grasping her arm, Ambler whirled her around roughly behind him. His face was grim. "Get goin' yoreself!" he gritted, his gun in his hand.

She wasted no more time but scrambled up the rocks as rapidly as she could manage. Once she threw a glance over her shoulder, and her marrow froze as she saw one of the Mexicans in the act of lifting his rifle. It banged once, the slug smearing a rock at Ambler's elbow. Before the peon could fire again, the leader of the skirmish party knocked up the barrel of the gun, venting a flood of guttural Spanish.

"Hustle!" Ambler grunted. "They aim to grab us alive—"

She understood. No chances were to be taken of a stray rifle ball striking herself—nor was it because these brute-faced men felt any slightest stir of pity for her. Up the rough slope the pair fought, perspiration bursting from their pores. Behind, terrifyingly close, swarmed the Mexicans. Ambler waved his gun, but he dared not fire, lest he set off a retaliatory fusillade which would cut them both down.

But something had to be done, and quickly. The goat-like pelados scrambled after, steadily gaining. With a cry of wrath, Ambler whirled, jagged rock in his upraised hand. He dashed it at the nearest pursuer. A direct hit, it tumbled the man. Ambler wasted time to grab up another chunk and

heave it with grunting power. Then whirling, he raced after the girl, scarlet from his exertions.

They barely made the bluff. Had any been there to intercept them, they would have been lost. As it was, they darted for the gaping hole in the wall from which they had emerged, and Ambler turned to fling a warning shot behind as they ran panting into another corridor.

"No luck," he groaned, slowing to look scrutinizingly into her face. "I was sure you'd be safe in that chapel. It never occurred to me we'd run into an ambush. Sorry, Julie—"

To his surprise, her head came up proudly. "I think I'm glad," she returned simply. "I prefer to stay with you—and Dad, whatever must come. As for Dyer . . ." She broke off, a catch in her voice.

"Yuh don't trust him no more'n I do." Ambler nodded tersely. "He'd toss Rip to the wolves in a minute, I know that."

They had better luck finding their way back to the great patio. The beleaguered men there might never have suspected their absence, for all the attention paid them.

"Get Julie back behind those walls," Pat directed the young fellow sharply.

Something new was astir out in the plaza just then. Dyer was cursing, and others joined him as he peered over the barricade. Pat moved that way alertly.

"They're gettin' a big wagon ready out there," Sloan exclaimed. "Looks like they're aimin' t' shove it right up t' the gate or somethin'—"

Julie exchanged an eloquent glance with Ambler. Quite plainly the situation had grown no easier. It bade fair to build up to a climax long before the blazing sun overhead had slanted into the west.

Pat was equally concerned for their shifting fortunes, moving from point to point of their defenses to keep posted on the enemy's maneuvers. He climbed the wall agilely and cautiously reconnoitered this latest move by Woll's forces.

What Sam had said was true. The Mexicans were preparing a large and cumbersome wagon for some purpose, piling its bed with crudely bundled bales of hay. Pat's eyes narrowed with comprehension. The strange engine of war he saw being made ready was meant to supply a barricade for the advancing insurgents, no doubt in a determined effort to breach the main gate.

That the outlaws understood as quickly was attested by an increase in their firing, while they sought to break up the activities out there. It was without avail. The thick wall of baled hay steadily mounted on the wagon. Sooner than Pat had any liking for, it was ready for use. Rip McGill, crouching at the barricade, alone appeared contemptuous of the Mexicans' design.

"Haw!" he snorted blusteringly. "Wait till they try hitchin' a team o' horses to that rig. We'll drop 'em in their tracks—an' that's as far as they'll git!"

Pat was by no means so confident. A few minutes later he detected ropes being attached to the front axle of the wagon, and nodded his understanding. The wagon was intended to be pushed up to the wall and guided safely from the rear as it advanced. Cortina's pelados were beginning to mass back there, calling orders gruffly and bustling about.

Few of the defenders in the Presidio failed to stifle an inward groan as the high-piled wagon swayed clumsily and lurched into motion. Slowly it trundled forward, a yard or two at a time, often creaking to a halt. Loaded down as it was with a solid wall of bales impenetrable to rifle fire, it must have borne a tremendous weight, which required many brawny, thrusting shoulders to move at all.

"Dang it, Stevens!" Dyer ripped out. "If they git close to the wall behind that thing, we're licked! They'll swamp us before yuh can pull trigger—"

"Should've thought o' that while yuh was makin' a deal t' deliver beef yuh didn't have," Sam Sloan tossed at him shortly.

Cal made no response beyond a murderous glance. To his credit, he showed no sign of losing his head in this dire emergency. It was McGill who yelled insults and imprecations at Sam, almost beside himself with excitement and rage. Pat paid no attention to the bickering, maintaining a sharp watch out in the plaza. A frown puckered his brows. There must be thirty or forty of Woll's most reckless and headstrong men creeping forward in the shelter of that grumbling, swaying wagon.

It did not advance directly toward the gate. Pat saw it swing aside in a rude curve, as if to avoid the direct fire of the defenders. From its general course, it appeared that the aim of the attacking party was to draw up under the shelter of the high Presidio wall and advance beside it to the gate. Stevens' eyes slitted thinly. A moment later he whirled about on the crown of the wall to call down into the patio.

"Ezra! Dyer!" he called sharply. "You an' one or two others. . . . Crawl up to the foot of the tower, there. Take sticks or anythin' yuh can find! Start diggin' at the wall. We've got to bring that tower down if we can. There may be time!"

"Why don't yuh climb up there yoreself, Stevens?" Cal hurled at him sarcastically. But he lost no time in following instructions, not a man in this crowd failing to recognize Pat as the leader now.

Pat crept along the wall and joined the men as they clambered up. Tersely he directed their activities, and would have taken part himself had not the scattered fire from the plaza grown hotter. Covering them as best he could, he watched the lumbering advance of the barricaded wagon. Steadily it crept toward the wall, the Mexicans behind it whooping and yelling as they scented conquest.

The tower wall was unbelievably thick. As he threw the feverish workers a glance from time to time, Pat's hopes sank. It seemed impossible to undermine the support of that ancient pile within the hour. But as the sweating men persisted, great chunks of the wall crumbled and fell away. Soon there was

a sizable breach in the base, which widened as they hacked at it.

"More on this side!" Pat called curtly. "If yuh don't drop it just right, yuh might's well forget the whole thing!"

They did as he said. The ragged tower, ten feet square, trembled and groaned with every blow struck at its base. Yet it still stood staunch. Pat peered over the wall. The wagon barricade was almost underneath now, grinding and crunching with fateful deliberation toward the gate.

"Give her hell!" Pat yelped, whirling fiercely on the crew of diggers.

So sure was he that they were bound to prove too late that he was as surprised as any when the tower gave a sudden lurch and started to lean.

"Git outa the way!" Ezra yelled. He and the others leaped from the wall spread-eagled. Pat waited till the last instant, gauging the fall of the towering mass of adobe. It seemed sure to fall too far outward. Then at the last, some quirk in the base caused it to swing in toward the wall. Down it came with a swishing rush, gathering tremendous momentum as it neared the ground.

The last thing Pat glimpsed before he sprang clear was the hay-piled wagon, directly under the impending mass of disintegrating adobe.

The tower struck with a thunderous roar, shaking the patio walls like an earthquake. A pall of dust puffed outward, thick enough to cut with a knife. Nothing could be seen through that murk, but all knew jubilantly what had occurred.

"Dammit, Stevens! You're all right!" Dyer admitted with a grim laugh. "Yuh made hash of them hombres! They won't try that trick again!"

"Somebody said they seen Woll himself behind that wagon," exclaimed Sam. "Yuh reckon we got 'im with the others?"

"Woll? That damned renegade!" Rip McGill exploded in

heady wrath. "He's responsible for all this! If he's out there, by Godfrey, I'll scalp the devil myself!"

He sprang up onto the log barricade before anyone could stop him, and leaped through the archway into the open.

"McGill!" Pat cried piercingly. "Come back, you fool! You'll be killed out there!"

An instant later, they heard Rip's bull-like bellow through the dust pall outside, and a quick scattering of shots. Julie screamed, looking like a ghost, her hand to her mouth.

"Blast him!" Stevens ground out. "Come on, boys! We'll see what we can find—"

In a body they burst through the gate and dived into the shroud of dust. Before he had gone five steps, Pat stumbled over something. He hauled up sharply, just as a musket exploded almost in his face. The Mexicans had also taken advantage of the obscuring dust to run forward and examine the wreck of the wagon and the crushed bodies of their raiding party, caught by the fall of the tower.

Crouching down, heedless of danger, Pat turned over an inert form and peered into the lifeless face. Ambler almost barged into him, hurrying forward. He found Stevens grim.

"It's McGill," Pat rapped out. "He's gone—the fool! Get hold of an arm, boy. We'll drag him an' get back inside ourselves, before they smother us out here in the open!"

19.

The hasty, makeshift funeral service with which Rip McGill was laid away in a shallow grave inside the patio, wetted by Julie's tears, made little difference in the grim siege of the Presidio. Ten minutes later, peering arrogantly out over the

barricade, Dyer almost fell when a musket ball whistled close by his head, then scrambled hastily back out of the way.

"They ain't forgettin' yuh, Cal." Sam grinned. "One down—an' one t' go. That's Woll's motto!"

Dyer scowled, the significance of all this not lost on him for a minute. The other outlaws had taken to glancing at him sourly, as if asking themselves why they bothered to put up with this unwelcome burden. He got it, and oddly enough it only tended to augment his cold defiance.

"He's due to go off the handle an' land us all smack in the fire," Ambler muttered uneasily to Julie, striving to get her mind off her loss.

Still in a state of shock, the girl turned to him now without reserve. "Jack, I—I'm deathly afraid," she confessed, her small face emptied of that stalwart courage which had sustained her for so long. With the death of her father, worthless as she knew the man to have been, had gone the last prop and support of her sturdy self-reliance.

"Keep a stiff upper lip," Ambler adjured, studying her anxiously. "Yuh done fine so far. You've gone through more than enough to make any girl wilt."

But she seemed to have come out of a bad dream, tragically aware now of the stark peril which, for the sake of her parent, until now she had resolutely refused to see. She shook her head slowly, with dolorous conviction.

"If we don't—make it," she whispered, clinging to him, "you'll know what I always thought of your—goodness to me . . ."

"Pah." He strove to cut her off, to crush this hopeless pessimism. "I only did what any fellow would! Why, Pat and his friends have done the same, Julie."

"Have they?" Her forlorn smile said she was not fooled for a second. "It was you who risked yourself for Dad and me, there on the Batwing. And at Tascosa you fought! I haven't forgotten."

Ambler sought to awaken her to the possibilities of the future. "Shucks! When we get out of this—"

A harsh-voiced altercation broke through their preoccupation, from outside in the patio. Starting, Ambler glanced out there. Gunfire from the besiegers had commenced again. Slugs thudded dully into the adobe walls, and the outlaws were firing a desultory return.

In the center of the patio, Dyer was arguing hotly with Pat Stevens. "I'll do as I please," the venomous outlaw leader bellowed. "It's my hide they're after—"

"And I say you'll go where I tell yuh, an' do as I say," Pat thundered. "It's my own hide *I'm* trying to save—and you ain't tossin' it away. Get up there on that wall, an' don't waste your lead!"

If Dyer looked ready to balk at all authority, red flecks glinting in his eyes, the sudden burst of an increasing fire from outside the walls made him think better of it. He ran to his position cursing, and just in time. This swelling rattle of musketry presaged a determined assault.

"Stay back," Ambler warned the girl swiftly. "They need me and I'm goin'—" He ran out to join in the battle, his Colt roaring as he caught sight of dodging figures beyond the gate. This proved the most violent attack yet. Rifles spanged along the thick walls, and the acrid smoke of gunpowder drifted on the heavy air. The pelados broke again and again from the cover of the wagons, making for the gateway—only to be stopped each time by a slashing fusillade.

Time, seeming deceptively to drag during the tenser moments, was actually fleeing by on wings. It was already past noon, the broiling sun glaring down on the turmoil in pitiless indifference. Ammunition began to run low among the defenders, and still the ragged, white-clad army mounted sortie after sortie. Doubtlessly General Woll, directing this heavy siege, had determined to breach the defenses if possible before waning day hampered his efforts.

Afternoon stretched out with no marked change in the

terms of the contest. The shadows were growing long when Pat saw Dyer spring from his post with an oath and start for the barricaded gate on the run.

"Hold on, now." Pat swung him around with a rough hand. "Where do yuh think you're goin'?"

Cal hardly saw him, face rocky with bitter resolve. "Hell, them crazy Mexes can't hit a barn," he whipped out recklessly. "I just spotted that damned Woll out there. I aim to run him down an' smoke him, Stevens. That'll break this fool thing up in a hurry!"

Pat shook a flat refusal to allow any such attempt, even while conceding Dyer's bullheaded bravery. "What yuh propose is suicide, man," he said shortly. "Yuh might reach Woll. You'd never get back here alive—"

"Damn an' blast, Stevens!" Cal was in no mood to be browbeaten now. "If you're in charge here, *do* somethin', or I will! My belt's empty, an' I'm sick of stallin'!" He broke off with a ferocious glare. "What'll it be?"

Pat understood that, regardless of sense, the man was on the ragged verge of exploding into violent action in almost any direction. He thought swiftly.

"Will yuh stop chokin' the horn if I explain my plan?" he asked.

"What plan is that?" Dyer was ugly.

"We'll take to the horses, of course," Pat tossed back. "That's the last thing they'll look for, an' I believe it'll work."

"Yuh mean sneak out the back?" The owlhoot's strident tone rejected that. "This place is surrounded now—"

"Not the back. Straight through that gate, Dyer, an' right through the middle of 'em all. I've found," Pat drawled, "that surprise always works with their kind—if it's big enough, an' sudden enough."

The outlaws had drawn close, listening to this talk. They discussed the plan in quick, gruff tones. All seemed of the conclusion that it might be just mad enough to succeed. Ambler alone demurred, and he was vehement.

"Yuh askin' Julie to ride through that cutthroat rabble with the rest of us, Stevens?" he demanded.

Dyer unexpectedly rounded on him. "What are you doin' here, punk?" he ground out. "Let the men talk. If yuh hadn't insisted on follerin' the girl like a sick calf, yuh wouldn't be here at all!"

Gritting his teeth over a useless retort, Jack started away.

"Ambler, you and Julie get the broncs ready," Pat instructed him levelly. "When we go, it'll be fast."

The young fellow whirled. "Yuh mean—soon, now?"

"I mean whenever they least expect us to," Pat retorted coolly.

The fire from outside increased in volume as the long afternoon waned. Still the skirmishing pelados had not worked up to the point of an all-out rush. Pat wondered if he could accurately judge the moment when it might come.

Sunset was flooding the canyon with dreamy light when Ezra called down in warning from the wall. "Somethin' cookin' out there," he told Pat. "They're scurryin' around, gettin' ready for some play—"

Within a matter of minutes the thundering gunfire increased to a crescendo. Probably Woll intended this to be the showdown. The outlaws watched warily, conserving their fire. There were not enough shells left among them to stave off a major assault. Pat measured the outlook with grim brevity, and made up his mind.

"All right, boys—" He waved them down from the walls, and they gathered about him swiftly, sensing some decisive action. He glanced over them sharply. "All accounted for? . . . Then we'll take to the broncs." There was iron in his curt tone. "Let's get out of this!"

With a rush, they made for their saddled mounts. Swarming aboard one of the roans, Dyer looked sternly triumphant once more. All of these men felt obscurely surer of themselves in the saddle.

"Julie!" Pat turned to the girl. "You'll ride in the middle.

Crouch down, an' stay between Ambler and me, no matter what happens!"

She nodded mutely, clutching her reins with bloodless fingers. Outside, the crackle of the guns was mounting still higher. It seemed impossible that men could ride through such a storm of lead and survive. But Pat was counting even more heavily than he admitted to himself on the element of sheer surprise.

They rode out into the patio, lining up, pausing for a last taut glance at one another. All were as ready as they would ever be.

"Make for the gate—an' take that barricade on the fly," Pat ordered tensely. "We're shovin' straight up the canyon, if we get through. But *keep goin' regardless!*"

Dyer triggered the rush by abruptly hurling his pony forward. The others were not far behind. They strung out slightly to allow for room at the gateway, and with fiendish yells echoing off the walls, they burst out of the Presidio like rockets.

Cortina's army had looked for no such startling move. For a moment the rattling of muskets slacked off completely, in what must have been sheer stupefaction. An officer or two, here and there among the wagons, let out a bellow of rage —and then the whole cutthroat army vented a thunderous roar.

Taking the lead in this helter-skelter flight, and flogging the extra Bar ES broncs ahead of them for cover, Ezra and Sam laid a zigzag course through the wagons, the hoofs of the flying roans striking sparks underfoot. A luckless soldado, unable to dodge back out of Sam's way, hurtled end-over-end as the horse rammed him and raced on. Pat snapped lightning shots toward the few tense figures showing through the boiling dust, and Julie rode as if born on the back of her pony.

Recovery from dull astonishment came to these stolid peons slowly. Presence of mind they never did succeed in wholly recapturing. A dozen muskets flashed at the fleeing

riders, but most of the rattled pelados managed only to fire haphazardly into their own ranks.

A gust of wild firing pursued the fugitives as the horses broke past the outer edge of the encampment. Scarcely believing in their escape, the tensed riders gazed ahead. Orange twilight showed them the empty canyon stretching to the fore, shrouded in mesquite and chaparral.

"We made it!" Dyer turned to look back, jubilation brightening his hard face. He seemed cockier than ever, his thin lips twisting. He came to himself with a jar, as Pat shoved his bronc up alongside.

"I'll bother yuh for that gun," he told the outlaw curtly. "Yuh won't be needin' it, Dyer, an' some innocent person might get hurt."

Cal's eyes went wide with astonishment. "What yuh mean, Stevens?" He strove to bluster. "I helped yuh out of that jackpot. We're in the clear now. I'll soon be sayin' so long to yuh—"

"You'll be sayin' it ten minutes after yuh say hello to Ranger Hall," Pat retorted briefly. "Maybe *you've* forgotten a few things, Dyer, but I haven't. Give me that gun!"

Taking his chances on the temper of the other outlaws, he reached over for the pistol which Dyer reluctantly yielded up. "Now shove along—an' don't make the mistake of tryin' to pull away, Dyer, because this time yuh won't make it!"

A scattered rattle of firing from the rear told them that some of the pelados had mounted a chase of sorts. The balls whistled overhead or tore through the brush, but no one was hit. Ten minutes later even this feeble harassment ceased, as darkness cloaked their flight.

For two hours they drilled on at their best pace, taking no chances. Mission Dolores might lie safely behind at last, but the Big Bend still stretched about them, mysterious and vast. Midnight found them still forging on; and now, having climbed out of the canyon into the wild southern flanks of

the Chisos, they could feel confident that Cheno Cortina's wild rabble had been shaken off for good.

"We're pullin' up, Stevens," Durkin declared gruffly. He was serving notice for himself and his fellows that, now the crisis was past, Pat's rule over them could also be considered at an end.

"All right, Durkin. We'll do the same—Lord knows, we all need rest." He faced the outlaw frankly. "I may as well say in plain words that my interest in your movements has ended. You can pull out or stay, an' you've got my hearty thanks for your help. But that don't go for Dyer," he warned thinly. "He's our meat, an' we're takin' him with us."

"Okay with me if yuh bury him in the sand," Durkin growled carelessly. "He's caused us fellers plenty o' headaches. I hope he gits fifty years!"

Only Julie showed any uneasiness as they hauled up and off-saddled in a rocky gulch. Such meager food as they had with them was soon cooking over the fire. Yet it was a cheerful, bustling camp. The owlhoots were light-hearted after their narrow escape, and their jests flew thick and fast.

Sam and Ezra stuck conspicuously close to Dyer, yet the outlaw did not seem particularly concerned. It was all Julie could do to force down a few bites, still bewildered as the girl was by the cruel rapidity of events. Handing her a blanket, Ambler led her off into the shadowy rocks.

"Pick out a comfortable spot, an' I'll stay between yuh and the camp," he told her reassuringly.

Julie looked her thanks. Emotion welled up in her, but strength appeared to have deserted her small frame tonight. Murmuring a few words, she moved apart. Seated, back against a rock, he heard her rustling movements as she settled for the night. The men at the fire were still moving about, and he watched them wearily.

"We'll be pullin' away early in the mornin'," Durkin was advising Pat. "Probably not yore way—"

Pat merely nodded. "Good luck, boys," he returned as quietly.

The camp fell silent as men sought their bedrolls. Jack knew that at least one man must intend to remain awake to guard Dyer; but thick shadows clustered in the defile as the fire died down, and he could see nothing. Night dragged on, with its wheeling stars.

After long hours, someone got up to move about for a few minutes and toss more wood on the dying fire. Ambler watched the flames for a long time. It must have been drawing on toward morning, and the fire was only a heap of glowing coals once more when action broke forth, suddenly and violently, in the shadowy camp.

The first Ambler dreamed that anything had gone wrong was when racketing gunshots ripped the night silence. Frozen with amazement, he saw the lancing muzzle bursts, and divined their aim. The knowledge jerked him to his feet, trembling.

"It's them owlhoots on the rampage!" he whipped out. "They're murderin' Stevens and the boys in their blankets!"

It was too dark to see down there, but a rush of stamping boots followed, and Ambler sensed the rapid movement of stumbling bodies. Gun in hand, at his wit's end where to turn in this sudden emergency, he hesitated for only a moment, torn by indecision—but that short fraction of time proved a grievous mistake. Before he could break from his immobility, something hard and cold crashed down on his skull, brilliant lights flashed in his brain and went out, and he dropped like a sack.

It seemed an endless time before he heard faint voices far away and struggled back to consciousness. Suddenly he started up, staring wildly about.

"Steady, boy! Yuh'll be all right." Supporting him, Sam Sloan eased him back gently. "Yuh got an awful thump on the knob, from the looks. Rest easy a minute—"

Ambler saw he had been carried to the fire. Only Pat, Sloan

and Ezra were standing in its light now, their faces grim. Ambler struggled to his feet and started away.

"No use lookin', Jack." Sam spoke with an effort. "She's gone—if it's Julie you're thinkin' of."

Ambler stared at him, tragic of countenance. "Dyer again! . . . Cal always swore he'd have her in the end," he exclaimed. "He said she had more nerve than some men." He glanced at Pat and Ezra. "I thought you gents were done for—"

Pat nodded briefly. "So did those outlaws! Evidently they got to thinking about the Bar ES horses, an' decided to grab 'em. They fired into our blanket rolls. As it happened," he continued dryly, "none of us was there at the time."

Ambler's brows hoisted. "Yuh mean you were watchin' for just such a play?" He made no effort to suppress his surprise at the keenness of these cagey men.

"We've still got the hosses, if that's what yuh mean," Ezra retorted. "But Dyer got in the clear, 'long with the others. Reckon he's got a grazed rib er two. But he grabbed the gal an' took out—"

"Oh, no!" Ambler groaned huskily. "Julie!"

"Too bad, boy," Sam commiserated hastily, reading his face. "We'll go after Dyer an' the girl, o' course, soon as daylight comes. But if I know that cussed rat, it may be too late by the time we overhaul 'em."

"You're thinkin' the same thing I am," Ambler charged sharply, only his hurt eyes pleading dumbly for contradiction.

Sloan refused to see it, however. "Reckon so, boy." He nodded heavily. "I'll be much mistaken if Cal Dyer wastes as much as a single minute before he gets hisself married t' that fine girl, tighter'n a drum!"

20.

"Keep that bronc movin'! And don't make no mistake about droppin' things," Dyer snarled, in a tone all the more fierce for being carefully guarded. "Come on! Shake it up. *I'm* your guardian now—and act as if yuh liked it!"

Night was a grateful shield for Julie McGill's withdrawn forlornness, while she numbly complied. Of all that had happened to her to overwhelm stoutness and dwindling courage, this was the crowning blow.

Roughly awakened by Cal Dyer, she had stumbled dazedly into the open, knowing his heartless willingness to strike her down for a whim. Somehow she struggled astride one of the horses the outlaw had managed to procure. There were muffled sounds of other shadowy forms moving about her.

Thundering away into the darkness, she was too stunned to ask what would happen to her now. In this darkest hour before the dawn, with Dyer's hard hand clenched on her bridle rein, she knew only that she was leaving safety behind with every stride of the horses.

A mile farther on, Cal reined down warily as the other shadowy riders drew close. The girl recognized the harsh voice of the outlaw Durkin.

"Wal, Dyer! So much for yore fine plans," the latter rasped. "Stevens was watchin' them hosses, and we had t' pull off without 'em." His tone hardened. "I see yuh got yore wish, as usual! Oughta take her way from yuh, and spoil yore fun—"

Dyer's instant action was to whip out the gun he had procured from somewhere. Durkin's chuckle was harsh.

"Never mind. We're pullin' away now," he told Cal with-

out haste. "Damned if I don't hope I never lay eyes on yore ugly mug again!"

Tight-lipped, Dyer warily watched them rein apart. He watched them jog off without a word. Then he whirled on Julie. "Kick some speed into that bronc!" he flung at her brutally. "We're gettin' out of this country fast!"

Out in the windy open, Julie had all she could do to remain upright in the saddle. When it seemed she could endure no more, faint dawn light revealed the desolate range all about them. Dyer's grim, bristly face startled her with its harsh reality. He too appeared tired and drawn, but alert.

The rising sun found them climbing the league-long chaparral slope of a lofty butte, at whose base the split and tumbling granite provided hiding place and lookout combined. With no food to sustain either, Julie dismounted to sink half-exhausted upon a rough ledge while Dyer scanned the horizon. She knew he feared pursuit, but that now seemed a remote threat at best. And in midmorning, it was not Stevens and his friends whom Cal spied, but a single tiny object moving across the range at a distance of several miles. The sight etched a triumphant grunt from him.

"Man ridin' a calico with a blaze face, eh?" Cal grunted, although Julie could not even tell whether it was a horse. "Take some lookin' into, this will—"

After forcing her to mount, with a last sweeping look to the rear he headed down the brushy slope. An hour later they drew near a solitary man whose sullen face the girl vaguely remembered from some camp on the Rio Grande. That he knew Cal, and feared him, was immediately evident.

"Wal, Kogert." Dyer greeted the man gruffly. "Turn in with us. I can use some help—"

"Where's Rip?" Kogert queried suspiciously, looking Cal and the girl over. Dyer waved indefinitely to the rear, without explanation. Obviously uneasy, but reluctant to refuse, Kogert turned in beside them.

"Headin' north, huh?" remarked Dyer carelessly.

Kogert flared up in disgust. "Sure I am! The whole border's hot as a runnin' iron—and all yore doin', Dyer."

Cal shrugged. "Water over the dam, old boy. Right now I've other things on my mind. Reckon yuh'll fit in just fine—"

Wanting to say no, Kogert hesitated. He had ridden with Dyer in the past; but having heard of the fiasco at Marfa, he was far from anxious to be identified with the other just at this time. In the end, his weak face decided for him. "I'll ride along, Cal," he muttered. "We'll lay low awhile."

"Sure," Dyer encouraged heartily.

The girl followed all this with a hopeless lack of interest. In the dark as to Dyer's plans, she felt she could take no more. Never having been fooled about her father's lack of manhood, she had blindly clung—too long—to the hope that he might be saved. Her faith had ended by dragging her down with him, but she had not shared his good luck in death. Gazing through tear-blurred eyes at Dyer's malign, catlike face, never so hateful to her as now, she knew there would be no last-minute reprieve for her.

"Whip up that bronc," Cal growled at her roughly. He kicked his own mount ahead as he spoke, and taking the hint, Kogert increased his pace as well. For hours they drove into the north, seeing no one, perhaps because Dyer directed the course they followed along the lee of long ridges, employing every available bit of cover.

Evening forced a brief halt to blow the horses and afford a scanty meal on the jerky Kogert carried in his saddle pockets. An early moon saw Dyer insisting on a fresh start. On through the ghostly brush they rode, Cal sticking close to the girl. Julie endured it all with the resiliency of her young strength. Long since she had ceased to look back. Of what avail was useless desire, numbing her sick heart?

The first faint glimmering of dawn showed them the grazing herd of a ranch only a few miles south of Marfa. Dyer carefully circled the place, making for a lonely range camp

on the edge of a lava-ledged wilderness. At his order, Kogert and the girl hung back while he reconnoitered the sagging, dirt-roofed cabin. It was empty, and he waved them on.

"Here we are." Dyer was harshly cheerful now. "Toss the broncs in the pen—all but yores, Kogey. We'll bog down here and wait while yuh ride on in town—"

Kogert stared at him. "Me? Ride in town? . . . What for?"

"Why, for the minister, Kogey. I'm gettin' married—fast." Dyer was cocky.

Kogert demurred. "Hell, Cal! I ain't too pop'lar in Marfa, myself. What if somebody recognizes me?"

Dyer's affable smile was unrelenting. "Stick to the back streets, and yuh won't have any trouble. Yuh can find the church easy. And don't forget—I'm expectin' yuh to trot the sky pilot out here pronto." There was an ugly edge to his careless words.

"What about the girl?" Kogert asked craftily. "Mebby she'll stall at the last minute—"

Dyer's face went rocklike, and he glanced at her hard. "She won't," he clipped off. Julie did not even glance up.

Still Kogert delayed, reluctant. "Suppose the dominie wants t' know why the hurry?" he demanded uneasily.

"Then get behind him and shove! It's an emergency, see?" Cal was speculating craftily. "I been hurt—fell off a bronc, or somethin'. I'm here in the bunk, an' Julie's bound t' marry me right off. It'll work." He was grimly confident.

Dyer's hard dominance in the hour of his triumph held, and Kogert finally jogged away without noticeable haste in the direction of Marfa. He was back in two hours, accompanied by a gaunt-faced cleric. Reluctant as he had been to become involved, Kogert had done a good job. The minister, Hansen by name, was all concern for the man he found lying slit-eyed and silent on a bunk in the cabin.

"This man needs a doctor," he pronounced, with friendly severity. "His color seems good, though. Some of these cow-

boys seem able to withstand incredible shocks. . . . Is this marriage at your desire, and with your consent, young lady?"

His kindly tone almost broke Julie. It looked, at the last minute, as if she might revolt. Her drawn face was stony and impenetrable as she thought of Ambler. A sigh escaped her then. She shrugged.

"All right, get about it, parson," Dyer growled, forcing a realistic groan. "Reckon my condition bothers her some—" Reaching out from under the blanket, he grasped Julie's listless hand, his iron fingers telegraphing a silent warning.

So the ceremony proceeded, Hansen's pious murmur uniting the pair indissolubly, for better or worse, till death did them part. Flies, buzzing in the disused cabin, seemed an ironic commentary on the purport of the hallowed words.

"Okay. Pay him," Cal rasped to Kogert, at the end. "Thanks, dominie. That's all."

The sharpness he showed cut Hansen's kindly remarks short. Patting Julie's limp hand, he turned to the door, and, more than a little puzzled, did not linger.

"Is he gone?" Dyer was on his feet, catlike in the shadowy place, a look of keen exultation wreathing his hard mouth. Her back to him, crushed by this final blow of unfeeling destiny, Julie did not trouble to answer. Cal stole a look from the door, and his viselike grip fastened commandingly on her arm.

"Wal, Mrs. Dyer!" he exclaimed brutally. "Now we're on our own—and to hell with Stevens, an' yore old lady, an' everybody else!" He stared into her face sharply. "Get a smile on that puss. We're leavin'!"

She allowed herself to be dragged outside. Even his callous stomach revolted by what he saw happening, Kogert stolidly saddled up their horses. He appeared to realize there would be no more need for his presence, as Cal ordered the girl into the saddle and swung his leg over his own mount.

"So long, pard," he sang out, giving Julie's pony a whack

over the rump and starting after it with a rush. "We're off on our honeymoon. See yuh in jail!"

"Maybe yuh got somethin' there, at that," a new voice cut through his heedless exhilaration. "Because that's where you're headin' next!"

Hauling up sharply, Dyer stared into the blue-bristled face of Sam Sloan, pushing his horse out of the brush to head him off. Ezra had halted Julie's mount, and Cal's alarmed glance took in Ambler and Pat Stevens closing in warily on either side. Arrested there, hemmed in as he was, the outlaw did not lose his presence of mind.

"So it's you birds again? . . . Just in time to congratulate me," he laughed impudently. "I know Ambler won't begrudge me the next couple o' weeks . . ."

"I can tell yuh where you'll spend your share of that time, Dyer," Pat threw at him coldly. "There'll be bars on the window—but maybe yuh can see out. It's according to what kind of accommodations Marshal Bagley has to offer—"

Dyer's look was bold. "Too late, Stevens. We're hitched now—the parson just left. Maybe yuh seen him go." Playing his ace, he sucked in his breath triumphantly. "Toss that gal's rightly wedded husband in the jug, for any reason yuh could name, and ask yoreself if yuh'll sleep tonight!"

Obviously he thought he had them stopped cold. Pat went along with it, staring at the girl's averted, bloodless face. "Is that a fact, Julie?" he asked sharply.

She did not look at him, or at anyone. "There was a—ceremony," she whispered brokenly. "We're—man and wife, I'm afraid."

If she expected Jack Ambler to take this without a whimper, however, she found herself mistaken. Jack shoved forward determinedly, his slitted eyes glittering with fight.

"Your error, Dyer," he rang out boldly. "I'm holdin' a trick that'll copper yore play. It makes all yore wild scramble, and this hurry-up ceremony yuh put on a rotten joke, because I intend to kill you!"

The effect of the words on Dyer was instantaneous. Rage marring his usual feline imperturbability, he whirled his horse toward Ambler in a twinkling. They saw the glint of metal as his six-gun flashed up.

"Watch it, Jack!" cried Pat.

Even as Dyer's gun muzzle descended, Ambler dropped off his horse on the side away from the outlaw. With the crash of the firearm, fragments of leather flew from the young fellow's saddle horn.

Before he could fire again, Pat hurled his horse straight at the man. Sam and Ezra closed in with a rush as well. But Cal had cunningly calculated all the moves of this play. Pivoting his bronc, he raced between them and made for the brush, crouching leechlike over the animal's withers.

Swinging into the saddle on the fly, and cutting across the open, Ambler crashed into the brush hard on the fugitive's heels. A yard or two behind, Pat saw Jack riding as never before. Ambler was having his hour, and he was masterly.

"That way! There he goes!" Jack waved Ezra and Sam to the left. "Knock his bronc down if yuh can. Then leave the wolf to me!"

Hoofs rang like metal off the crumbling lava as the horses whipped through the lashing brush. Once and again Ambler rose in his stirrups to level his gun, only to delay for a better shot. "Drive him toward the rocks!" he called piercingly. "We'll corner him there!"

Cal's roan swooped like a skimming bird, lifting effortlessly over the ledges. Gradually he drew ahead, and even to Pat it looked as if he might yet give them the slip. Suddenly the outlaw checked. He saw his course blocked against a ragged cliff of broken lava, and attempted to turn aside. Too late! Ezra's slug sent his hat sailing off. Ambler was closing in from the other side.

Biting off a curse, Dyer desperately slid from his horse, just as Jack came smashing forward. Without drawing rein, the latter dived out of the saddle, slid across the back of Cal's

mount, and crashed into Dyer from behind as he started to lunge away. Down they went in a cloud of dust! But Dyer flung free and leaped up. He sprang toward a narrow crevice leading up the cliff, Ambler at his heels. Breath whistling, they fought the steep acclivity, clawing at the rocks and straining every muscle and sinew. Slowly but surely Jack overhauled his prey.

Hurrying up below, Pat and the partners heard the muffled crash of a gun without being able to see what had happened. But an instant later a piercing yell pealed forth, and hard on its heels, Dyer and his pursuer, locked in a death grip, a whirling tangle of arms and legs, came tumbling wildly down out of the rocky crevice, avalanching into the open.

Rolling swiftly to the bottom, they landed with Dyer underneath. His head struck a rock with a dull pop like a melon exploding. Breath groaned out of him in a wheezing sigh, and his limbs relaxed. Ambler struggled up, more surprised than anything else. He stared down at the inert form, so lately filled with cougarish vitality.

"He's stopped breathin'," he gasped out hoarsely. "Looks like the end of the line for Cal Dyer!"

When she heard the words pronouncing Dyer and herself man and wife, Julie had confidently believed all feeling dead in her, seeming as it did the end of everything. She learned her mistake with a profound and reviving shock as Ambler came plodding wearily around the corner of the line cabin, leading his horse. With no thought of Dyer or of anything else, she rushed forward and flung herself into Ambler's arms, trembling violently from reaction.

"Jack! You're—you're all right?" Anxious small hands searched his shoulders, and pleading brown eyes filled with loving concern never left his hard young face. "I thought I'd never see you again!"

"Reckon yuh'll be sadly disappointed, then—if this young feller's got any say in the matter."

Sam Sloan stood smiling at the pair of them like a benevolent satyr, Pat Stevens and Ezra at his back. Julie looked at him gravely for a long minute, across Ambler's shoulder. When she spoke, the old bravery was back in her voice again.

"You've cured me, Sam, of ever wanting to ride with outlaws again—you, and Pat Stevens, and Ezra! I know now just how tough good men can be. After the last week—" Her words trailed off with a shudder. She stiffened then, rich blood rushing into her face. "*Oh!* I—heard more shooting—saw that man racing on his horse! Did Cal Dyer escape? . . . What happened?"

Ezra took pity on her consternation. "Stop worryin'," he growled, with a twinkle. "Ambler give yuh a quick divorce—"

"Dyer's *dead?*" Her breath caught sharply.

Ambler nodded, watching her face. "He's gone, Julie. You're free as the air. Yuh can't be sorry for that!"

Pat read her troubled thought, and spoke up quickly. "Yes, it's all over, and a damn lucky accident at that. They fell down, fightin', and Cal cracked his head on a rock. His own wildness killed him. Ambler happened to get in the way, is about the size of it."

Julie's clasp tightened about Ambler, in unmistakable earnest of her concern for his danger. Seeing Jack's face light up, Sloan winked at the young fellow.

"Reckon now you're faced with the job o' huntin' up that parson all over again," he chuckled. "Dyer's sidekick pulled out in a hurry while the pullin' was good—but we'll git that girl married somehow, an' for keeps this time!"

Pat nodded, scrutinizing the young couple. "That's what the doctor would order, for both of 'em. Fortunately, Ranger Hall told me there's a reward out for Dyer, dead or alive. He's been in the rangers' black book for months. You're a lucky dog, Ambler," he proceeded serenely. "The amount ought to be enough to set you and Julie up for life—and as matters turned out, it's all yours. Not," he concluded, with a

twinkle of amusement, "but what you seem to be up to facin' your own troubles from here on out!"

"I'll make a pass at it, anyhow," breathed Jack.

The expression on Julie's shining face, as she swept Pat and the partners with a look of deepest gratitude, still imprisoned in Ambler's jealous embrace, said that henceforth they would no longer complain of whatever life might hold in store for them.

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